

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



Issue 86
May 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

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Cover Photo: On 5 January 2022 the 12:34 from Wick, passes Achentoul, with the two snow covered Ben Griams in the background.

Photo: **Niall Laybourne**

IMPORTANT NOTE TO OUR MEMBERS

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

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

HEADCODE

It is really coming to something when the Director of Rail for Transport Scotland replies, "I'm looking forward to finding out", when asked at a conference what effect the Williams-Shapps Review findings, and the setting up of Great British Railways, will have in Scotland. With Scottish ministers and civil servants kept at arm's length from the Union Connectivity Review and the Williams-Shapps Review the relationship between the two governments, certainly as far as rail is concerned, could be described as dysfunctional.

This, one assumes, is the manifestation of the Westminster Government's fear of Scottish Independence and therefore an aversion to doing anything which could be misinterpreted as either acknowledgment of its likelihood, or tacit approval of such an outcome. The refusal to even discuss separating Network Rail Scotland Route to come under Scottish Government control, despite the obvious logic of that, is another example. Whatever one's political views on Scottish Independence it is clearly the case that the Scottish railway already works as a team - Team Scotland is how it is referred to by the participants. We too are looking forward to finding out how on earth Great British Railways is meant to function in Scotland.

On 1 April ScotRail Trains took control of ScotRail from Abellio, thereby nationalising most rail operations in Scotland. It will be interesting to see how this turns out - initial reactions from ScotRail managers seem positive, particularly in respect of the ability to make longer term plans than has been possible under the franchise system. To be successful this needs politicians to take a much longer term view too, but at the same time to make sure that work needed to give sufficient capacity for the planned modal shift to rail is begun as soon as possible. No more huge reports full of general aspirations - we need an action plan now.

On 28 April the Scottish Government Economy and Fair Work Committee published its report on Scotland's supply chain. This has been under stress recently because of Brexit, a shortage of HGV drivers, Covid-19 and now the war in Ukraine. Its call for evidence elicited 40 responses and evidence was also gathered in oral sessions. Naturally we hope that rail freight would be seen as key and certainly there are many references in the report to the need to improve rail infrastructure to accommodate this. It was good to see the following from Kerr Dunvegan (consultants):

"The first priority for the Scottish supply chain is to accelerate the transfer of freight from road to rail. This will have short and long term benefits:" which are then listed in detail.

Let's hope the politicians are paying attention!

FoFNL AGM & CONFERENCE

Our 2022 event looks set to take place as planned on **Friday 17 June**. The venue is **The National Hotel**, Dingwall, which is close to the station.

We will have four speakers as usual: **Kate Forbes MSP**, Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy; **David Simpson**, Operations Director, ScotRail; **Phil Sherratt**, Editor, Modern Railways; and a **Network Rail** sponsor of current work on the Far North Line.

The AGM will take place at **10:30** followed by the Conference at around **11:15**, which is also open to members of the public.

We very much hope that many FoFNL members are able to attend. The National Hotel has kindly offered a special rate for attendees of **£85** per night. If you wish to take up this offer please phone **07377 355807** letting them know that you are attending the event.

FOFNL AIMS & ACTIONS

FoFNL campaigns in general for much faster and better services, facilities and customer experience. We monitor reliability, accessibility, safety, sustainability, value and resilience, and look for progress in these areas.

This is a list of specific FoFNL Aims and Actions on which we base our campaigning.

'Aims' are improvements which we wish to see.

'Actions' are more about an awareness of things to be mentioned and lobbied for whenever we're in a situation for passing on views.

Sometimes things on the 'actions' list will throw up specific projects to add to the 'aims' list.

AIMS

- New passing loop(s) on one, or both, of the two long sections between Helmsdale and Georgemas Junction (each 24¼ miles)
- Best possible modal interchange facilities at Inverness and at Thurso for Orkney
- Halkirk Station - Georgemas Curve - Thurso-Wick Shuttle ¹
- New alternatively fuelled rolling stock ²
- Additional year-round Sunday service to Thurso/Wick
- Evanton Station (possibly requiring closure of Kildonan because of issues with crew hours) ³
- Capitalise on the presence at Invergordon of one of the few deep water ports on the East Coast

ACTIONS

- Promote use of FNL stations as 'hubs' for interchange with other modes, including Demand responsive transport (DRT). Possible development of social facilities too - e.g. café and/or small shop
- Lobby for additional regular freight traffic (intermodal / bulk / semi-bulk, such as

timber and steel)

- Form closer links with communities along the line ⁴
- Keep a critical eye on planning applications for new developments to check whether they are consistent with sustainable travel objectives

NOTES

¹ There are three elements, shuttle, chord and reopened Halkirk Station, which give these options: A simple shuttle service between Thurso and Wick. Utilisation of the shuttle to replace alternate legs of the end-to-end service, with a change at Georgemas Junction (GGJ). This would save around 25 minutes on the INV-WCK journey. Construction of a chord allowing trains to bypass GGJ and proceed directly to Thurso. The train would then proceed to Wick. Provision of a station at Halkirk with either an island platform, or a bay. This would enable INV-THS/WCK services to terminate alternately at THS or WCK. The other leg would be provided by the shuttle with cross-platform interchange. The shuttle could still travel direct via GGJ when not connecting with a train to/from the South. This option would also give a more convenient station for Halkirk passengers.

² There is a need, especially in the light of expected increases in tourist traffic as part of modal shift, to provide comfortable trains to enable the best enjoyment of the scenery and to provide cycle accommodation. It may be that one type of new unit would be suitable for both the FNL & Kyle lines and the West Highland Line.

³ When the service pattern is recast around Helmsdale the train crew roster limitations may be mitigated.

⁴ This is not meant in the sense of becoming similar to a CRP, the emphasis would be on communicating better with any existing local organisations.

FoFNL Committee – February 2022

DISTANCE VERSUS JOURNEY TIME

and the will to improve Highland connectivity

Improvements to our feeder routes into Inverness are vital to Far North Line traffic, both passenger and freight.

Inverness - Edinburgh

Time marches on. We are into the third decade since the 2008 Scottish Government strategy promise to reduce the rail journey time between Edinburgh and Inverness by 25 minutes to a 3 hour average.

The new timetable, which comes into force this month on 22 May, invites passengers to endure a service which only manages to achieve a 3h 38m average each way; seemingly an incredible 13 minutes slower than 14 years ago! Frequency has increased but rail timings are going backwards. All of this, at an average of only 50 mph, has to compete with the A9/M90 trunk road which continues to get quicker. There is still no commitment to replace the strategic direct Edinburgh to Perth railway, sacrificed in order to build the M90. That of itself would save another 30 minutes on the journey to Perth and consequently to Inverness.

The May 2022 timetable shows five ScotRail direct trains each way. Previously there had been seven southbound. The fastest timings are 3h 30m southbound and 3h 24m northbound. The slowest are seriously unimpressive at 3h 48m southbound and 3h 51m northbound. LNER is to achieve 3h 19m southbound and 3h 34m northbound.

These timings show how Scotland's intercity provision falls far short of that in England. A train leaving Euston for Glasgow would be almost there in the time it takes to get from Inverness to Edinburgh - less than half as far.

The climate-friendly targets to reduce road traffic by 20% and to send much more freight by rail will not be met by further delaying the necessary work to improve the single track lines to Inverness. The strategic need to upgrade was recognised and promised by the transport minister in the parliamentary answer S3W-24784 to Mary Scanlan MSP on 11 June 2009 to implement priorities 3 and 4 of the *Strategic*

Transport Projects Review of 2008. [See page 12.]

If this had been done we would now have a head start in timetabling both climate-friendly passenger and freight services. The written answer includes enhancements for freight.

Aberdeen - Inverness

A similar disappointment arises with the strategic Aberdeen to Inverness line which was 4th priority in 2008 but is not even mentioned in the 45 recommendations for the 2022 Strategic review! [Three other corridor enhancements feature strongly]

The line is near capacity. Freight paths will be required for whisky and timber traffic and more paths are needed now for the proposed hourly passenger frequency and weren't there for the freight diversions when Aberdeen was cut off



Photo: Sandy Colley

from the south by the two lengthy blockages at Carmont.

The 2008 promise of an enhanced hourly service, initially planned for the end of 2016, was to provide an average journey time of no more than two hours between Aberdeen and Inverness. The May 2022 timetable can do no better than an average 2h 17m westbound and 2h 19m eastbound, an end to end average of around 47 mph (with trains capable of 125 mph!).

Some serious strategic thinking and action is needed now to provide urgent capacity improvements.

Richard Ardern

PANDORA

Nearly four years have passed since Pandora was last exercised by the Wicked Fairy called CHANGE. She has reared her head again and it's time to see what effect she's having this time round. In the bigger - GB-wide - picture she seems to be accompanied by her Wicked Sister, UNCONSCIONABLE DELAY. Some time ago the then (still!) Secretary of State bolted his name onto the review being carried out by Keith Williams. Alas he failed to bolt on any energy at the same time. Of swiftness there is none, nor does its absence seem to raise any hackles.

When the Attlee Government nationalised the Big Four after the War the legislation went through remarkably quickly and the deed was done on 1 January 1948. Now, getting on for 4 years since it was set up, the Williams-Shapps Review is still at the the stage when the Minister "hopes" that parliamentary time will be available for a Bill before the election due in 31 months and almost certainly likely to be held well before then. Meanwhile the DfT continues to meddle at all levels in matters where it has no hands-on experience.

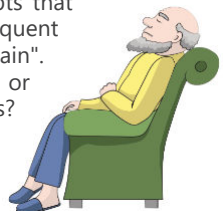
Pandora contemplates Change

So often Pandora holds up the experience of the railway south of the Border as an exemplar of what to avoid. Are we better off in Scotland? CHANGE is afoot here too. To the extent that what the DfT decides to put in its Bill with regard to the functions of Network Rail we are still in the dark. Transport Scotland is still waiting to see what these plans are. It remains the policy of Scottish Ministers that NR's functions in Scotland should be devolved to their

control, but there is no hint that the DfT sees it that way. Pandora foresees some years - 3, 4? - of continuing uncertainty. Plans to electrify large chunks of the railway in Scotland will go ahead, albeit later than we all hoped before COVID, because Scottish Ministers are determined that diesel haulage shall be largely eliminated. Plans to recognise the utter destruction of the old business model (ie. far less commuting/business and far more tourism/leisure) and its consequent effect on fare structures are non-existent. Jolly short-term wheezes - reducing fares dramatically for a few weeks - will be as useless as the Eat Out To Help Out wheeze two summers ago. Cheap grub for a few weeks but no lasting benefit. And while CHANGE is fluttering about, any serious attempt to create a business model with a sensible fare structure will not happen.

Another thing that CHANGE has wrought - though COVID can be blamed as well - is the complete disappearance of printed timetables. When he was a lad Pandora forked out money (1/-) for a Scottish Region timetable. Fast forward a decade or four and he saw a ScotRail timetable - the whole thing in a book that was once for sale and then, in later years, available to station staff (with courtesy copies to the Rail Passengers' Committee). Another decade on and it was twee little folded jobs, and Pandora had to go to Glasgow and Edinburgh to collect a full set. And now ... nothing. Pandora accepts that COVID has made the printing of timetables foolish, given the frequent changes. But "living with COVID" means "having printed timetables again". The twee ones will do, Pandora supposes, but a proper book (at £2 or whatever) would ease the pain. If Great Western can do it, why not us? (A rare example of good practice coming the other way.)

Grumble over for now.



DALCROSS PROGRESS



Due to favourable weather conditions in the first quarter of the year much progress has been made at the new station beside Inverness Airport.

So far the station site has been cleared, the foundations for one of the platforms and the footbridge and the lift have been prepared and the embankments created. The rails for the loop to the other platform appear to have been delivered and await installation.

A decision has yet to be made about the location of a new airport terminal building, but it seems obvious that placing it within easy walking distance of the station should be a major priority, given the need to have as many passengers as possible arriving by train. As David Millar, Project Manager for Network Rail, said, "Once complete, the station will enhance the local area and improve connectivity for local residents and the wider Inverness area by providing a new sustainable transport interchange."

Dalcross Station is planned to open in December 2022.

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



[Top] Looking west from the airport link road bridge. Preparation can be seen for the new loop which will serve the second platform.

Photo: **Sandy Colley**

[Bottom] Looking west from the next road bridge as the two platforms take shape. The platforms will extend beyond the link road bridge.

Photo: **Network Rail**

The Scottish Government's long awaited STPR2 finally reached the draft report stage in January as reported briefly in FNE 85. There followed a consultation period, with responses via a questionnaire which had to be supplied by 15 April. Later this year the final report will be published.

We do not know what level of detail, if any, to expect but it is worrying that one of the declared intentions is to work with what we have. This would of course be fine if what we have in the Highlands were sufficient to transport the extra passengers and freight from the modal shift which is the Scottish Government's aim.

There are reasons to be optimistic amongst the list of general improvements referred to in the report. It is clear that the writers, and therefore the Scottish Government, are well aware of the need to improve the "strategic corridors", but as yet there are few details of specific aims or the plan to achieve them.

There is a very long section in the Draft Report describing the 'sifting' process. Whilst struggling to keep the image of a room full of flour-covered people in chef's whites out of one's mind, we read that "Approximately 14,000 individual ideas/suggestions/options were identified at this stage in the process." After "option cleaning", which means removing duplicates, the list was reduced to around 2,800 options which then had to be "sifted". Sifting is the process of comparing the suggestions with various criteria: STPR objectives, Regional Problems & Opportunities, Deliverability, Strategic Option, Investment Hierarchy.

This reduced the list to 1,428 options which were to proceed eventually to Preliminary Appraisal. These were grouped into categories, of which 197 were under 'Rail', 40 under 'Bus' and a further 168 under 'Public Transport'. These were further reduced to 45 'recommendations' of which STPR2 says, "Within the list of recommendations, there are no specific priorities, as each component is important in addressing the complex needs of our nation. Neither are these interventions the sole responsibility of Transport Scotland to deliver, indeed many will rely on working together or for others to take forward."

Searching for 'actual' plans affecting the Highlands we find this for the Highland Main Line:

"STPR2 recommends a programme of enhancements, including new and longer passing loops with more flexibility, and permissible speed increases. This would achieve improvements to journey times and increases in capacity and reliability for passenger and freight services. Precise interventions would be developed following more detailed work in the business case process."

We are also reassured that Inverness gets a mention under "Stations":

"STPR2 makes three core recommendations. These involve continued investment in the major rail stations in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Perth and Inverness".

References to the Far North Line are about the possible development of freight facilities at Georgemas and Altnabreac and "Far North Line Capacity Improvements (South of Invergordon)". There is also mention of an Orkney to mainland Scotland fixed link but one suspects they may not have a Far North Line terminus in Kirkwall in mind!

Early in the STPR2 process FoFNL was invited to send in a submission. It is appropriate to print both that and the response document we attached to our completed STPR2 Draft Report Questionnaire on the following pages. That actual questionnaire is too long to include here so there is a link to it on the companion web page for this issue - www.fofnl.org.uk/fne/cps/fne86.html - along with a link to the full STPR2 Draft Report.

FOFNL STPR2 SUBMISSION 2020



Introduction

This is the Friends of the Far North Line's submission for the development of the Scottish Government's Strategic Transport Projects Review 2.

Our perspective on strategic rail plans for Scotland for the next 20 years is that of campaigning for the best possible outcomes for passengers and freight, with the Far North Line providing the most resilient corridor between Orkney and the rest of Scotland, England and the other European countries.

Above all we seek a major readjustment of Scottish Government transport priorities which accepts that although the road system needs to be fully maintained, rail needs to be placed at the forefront of planning and financing decisions as we move towards a more sustainable transport system.

1. Far North Line

In addition to the already planned works, including the Lentrans Loop:

- Provision of a chord between Halkirk and Georgemas to allow direct services to Thurso or Wick without reversal and provision of 'branch' services, probably best achieved by opening a new station at Halkirk with an island platform so that trains from either Thurso or Wick can terminate there, allowing passengers to change to/from the other branch.
- Extension of the Far North Line to Scrabster to connect directly with Orkney ferries. *[We recognise there are difficulties with the topography here.]*
- Provision of a loop, perhaps at Kinbrace. Long enough to accommodate maximum length freight trains, to aid timetable resilience and allow additional paths. The current distance between loops, HMS-FRS takes around 35 mins resulting in massive delays when there is even minor late-running in one direction.

2. The doubling of the Highland Main Line north of Perth and the remainder of the Aberdeen-Inverness route.

It is likely that doubling of both lines would be done in stages which would need to be worked out taking into account greatest efficiency both economically and in terms of disruption. If there is significant delay in doubling these routes, temporary midway loops should be considered between Keith and Elgin; Dunkeld and Pitlochry; and Dalwhinnie and Kingussie to ease the current pinch points by the middle of CP6.

The following specific comments may also prove useful:

HML

- Fettle up Culloden Viaduct to take two trains at once New line alongside old between Kinraig and Kingussie but on higher embankment to prevent flooding
- Dredge Gynack Burn at Kingussie station to prevent flooding
- New resilient line between Ballinluig and Dunkeld on higher embankment to prevent flooding
- Completely remodel Perth station to ease punishing speed limits on approaches from north and south

Two further items which would improve journeys towards the Central Belt are:

- Construct loop at Newburgh to allow trains to pass on that line (needed before reopening of direct route to Edinburgh)
- Construct Greenhill flyover to allow trains from north to GLQ easier access on to the Edinburgh - Glasgow main line

Inverness - Aberdeen

- Reinstate siding at Norbord factory to receive timber trains and export wood panels
- Take steps to prevent flooding near the Nairn, Findhorn and Lossie bridges and in Elgin goods yard
- Provide well connected sidings in Elgin with good road access to serve future whisky related traffic and also timber traffic
- Prior to doubling, make provision for trains to cross at Keith without keeping one train and its passengers waiting for a late runner to arrive, either by: Building another loop on the Inverness side of the station as favoured in NR doc 116647 Aberdeen to Inverness Rail Improvement of 2010, page 36, paragraph 4.6.1, or building a second platform with disabled access etc.
- Provide well connected sidings at Keith with good road access to serve future whisky related traffic and also timber traffic
- Reinstate sidings at Huntly when required for timber traffic Ensure sufficient platform space and access at the north end of Aberdeen station

3. The electrification of the lines from Stirling to Perth, from Perth to Inverness and Aberdeen and from Inverness to Aberdeen.

4. The reopening and electrification of the direct, and 30 mins quicker, route between Perth and Edinburgh via Kinross. That journey currently takes as long as it did at the end of the 19th Century.

Ian Budd, Convener, the Friends of the Far North Line, 15 January 2020.

FOFNL RESPONSE TO STPR2 DRAFT REPORT

The process for a response to the report was to complete a questionnaire, in which boxes were provided for additional comments. FoFNL felt that the format made it difficult to get our views across and decided that the best approach would be to attach a response document. We have ticked the boxes but added references to the document both after some questions, and in the comments boxes when available.

The excerpt shown here demonstrates the limitations of any questionnaire format, in that choosing one box to tick gives a misleading representation of our views. It is neither useful nor valid to have to choose a 'top priority' from a list containing several equally important elements.

Q8. Which of the overall key themes is your / your organisation's top priority?.

- 1. Improving active travel infrastructure
- 2. Influencing travel choices and behaviours
- 3. Enhancing access to affordable public transport
- 4. Decarbonising transport
- 5. Increasing safety and resilience on the strategic transport network
- 6. Strengthening strategic connections
- Don't Know / No Opinion

Q9. Which of the overall key themes is your / your organisation's lowest priority?.

- 1. Improving active travel infrastructure
- 2. Influencing travel choices and behaviours
- 3. Enhancing access to affordable public transport
- 4. Decarbonising transport
- 5. Increasing safety and resilience on the strategic transport network
- 6. Strengthening strategic connections
- Don't Know / No Opinion

FoFNL's answer to Q8 is the closest option to our actual top priority - see Section 1 of attached FoFNL Response.

The Friends of the Far North Line is a voluntary campaign group with around 250 members. Our declared aim is to see improved rail provision for passengers and freight using the line from Inverness northwards to Thurso and Wick.

Many of the passengers, and much of the freight potential, will also be using the neighbouring lines across from Inverness to Aberdeen and onwards, and south from Inverness on the Highland Main Line. As these two routes are crucial to our traffic we also keep a close eye on developments there.

1. The Scottish Government's policy to reduce car kms by 20% by 2035 is expected approximately to double the number of rail passengers countrywide. Added to the planned increase in rail freight, this amount of modal shift can only be accommodated by major work on the lines south and east of Inverness as well as some capacity improvements to the Far North Line, especially for freight. There is momentum at present for transferring freight to rail and it would be a serious failing if the necessary capacity were not available.
2. There is also the increasing likelihood of all three lines in the Inverness-Aberdeen-Perth triangle being needed more often for weather-related diversions due to the effect of Climate Change. Whilst passengers can be transported by bus at short notice, freight is far less flexible. Single track railways are unsuitable as inter-city routes and this needs to be addressed in the near future.
3. STPR2 sets out general recommendations for the kind of transport provision Scotland should aim for, and compares these with the Scottish Government's general policy tenets. The general recommendations cover all the obvious needs for transport in Scotland but there is very little detail about how the recommendations should be fulfilled. FOFNL assumes that the final report will include a list of specific projects.
4. There is comparatively little about rail in the draft STPR2 report, especially with regard to the HML, A21 and the Far North Line about which there are no details. The effect of the pandemic in changing the emphasis of travel away from commuting towards leisure and tourism, combined with the requirement for major modal shift to rail to meet the Net Zero target, require new ways of considering investment needs. The long-standing methodology based on the greatest potential usage as an indicator of 'value for money' does not fit the new reality and in truth has always put the Highland area, with its comparatively low population, at a disadvantage.
5. The original STPR Report of 2008 contained specific plans for the HML which were not implemented. It is worrying to find this sentence in the STPR2 Draft Report: "*Future passenger rail investment should therefore be targeted on the strongest city-to-city markets as the routes where the greatest value from improvements will be realised*". If travellers from Perth northwards, and between Aberdeen and Inverness, are to be enticed out of their cars the very least they need is a fast, regular, reliable rail service. There is nothing in STPR2 so far which suggests that this will be achieved. The 'value' mentioned in the quote above must be considered in social and economic development terms, not financial.
6. Users of the Far North Line are beginning to benefit from the work done by the Far North Line Review Team which was set up at the end of 2016. This includes replacing the train operation of points at the entrance and exit of passing loops with radio-controlled point motors, providing electronic passenger-operated request stop equipment, upgrading level crossings to allow faster transit of trains, replacing one level crossing with a bridge, upgrading the RETB equipment, and installing a passing loop at Delmore near the southern end of the line. A complete reworking of the

service pattern is being considered, which would allow some limited-stop journeys, thereby reducing journey times.

7. Much more needs to be done once this work is completed so FoFNL hopes to see the following:

- New passing loop(s) on one, or both, of the two long sections between Helmsdale and Georgemas Junction (each 24¼ miles)
- Best possible modal interchange facilities at Inverness and at Thurso for Orkney
- Provision of a station at Halkirk and the construction of a West chord to bypass Georgemas Junction Station
- Provision of Thurso-Wick shuttle service
- New alternatively fuelled rolling stock
- Additional year-round Sunday service to Thurso/Wick
- Provision of a station at Evanton
- The FNL capitalising on the presence at Invergordon of one of the few deep water ports on the East Coast
- Additional regular freight traffic (intermodal / bulk / semi-bulk, such as timber and steel)

8. Many of our passengers are travelling to/from Edinburgh. The current journey time between Perth and Edinburgh is roughly as it was in 1895. With the closure of the direct route in 1970, it is now much quicker for passengers and freight to travel by road. A 35 minute reduction in the rail journey would be possible if the direct route via Kinross were reopened.

9. **Conclusion:** It is disappointing to see so little mention of projects for railways in the Highlands where, arguably, there is the most work needing to be done. This huge area is being left behind the rest of Scotland in rail transport terms, at the very time when it needs much better rail provision for passengers and freight. The 3rd and 4th priorities for work on the HML and A2I in STPR of 2008 were largely dropped, without consultation.

Our 2020 STPR2 Submission is attached for reference.

Ian Budd, Convener, Friends of the Far North Line, 7 April 2022

The first *Strategic Transport Projects Review* was published in **2008** and contained specific recommendations, as can be seen here in the answer to a Parliamentary Question asked by Mary Scanlon MSP on 11 June 2009. [Referred to by Richard Arden on page 5.]

Rail was overtaken by road projects on that occasion, let's hope this time it's different.

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

SG PLANS FOR STPR IMPLEMENTATION GIVEN ON 19 JUNE 2009

S3W-24784: Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands), Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party

Date lodged: 11 June 2009

To ask the Scottish Executive what improvements are planned for a faster and more frequent rail service from Inverness to (a) the far north, (b)

Aberdeen, (c) Perth and (d) Kyle of Lochalsh and what the expected completion dates are.

Answered by Stewart Stevenson: 19 June 2009

A number of recent timetable improvements reflect this Government's continuing commitment to increasing the frequency of rail services and reducing journey times, including:

From December 2008:

A new service each way between Aberdeen and Inverness;

A new service from Inverness to Wick and Thurso six days per week;

An additional all year round service on the Kyle of Lochalsh line.

From May 2009:

New morning connections from Glasgow and Edinburgh allow passengers to arrive at Kyle of Lochalsh by 4 pm.

The following interventions, which will contribute to faster and more frequent rail services, are recommended in the *Strategic Transport Projects Review*:

Intervention		Timescale
Highland Main Line (Project 17)	Reduction in journey times between Inverness and Perth by 35 mins, resulting in a faster journey time of 2 hours 45 mins; Infrastructure improvements to facilitate the operation of longer freight trains.	Estimated completion date: 2012-2013.
Aberdeen to Inverness Rail Improvements (Project 19)	Reduction in journey times between Inverness and Aberdeen by up to 20 mins; New station at Dalcross to serve Inverness Airport.	Will be progressed by 2016.
Rail System Enhancements (Project 12)	Replacement of signalling on Highland Main Line; A number of infrastructure improvements throughout the network.	
Electrification of the Rail Network (Project 6)	Electrification of the entire Scottish rail network is a long-term objective which will contribute to the reduction in overall CO2 emissions in Scotland.	Phase 1 of the programme (Glasgow to Edinburgh line via Falkirk) estimated completion date: 2016. Remaining phases of the programme will be delivered according to our investment hierarchy and subject to availability of funds.

KLIMATICKET

[www](http://www.klimaticket.at)

In a radical departure from typical fare structures the Austrian government has introduced a new kind of ticket for residents. It is the *KlimaTicket* and costs €1,095 per annum. It is valid on all trains, buses and trams and is designed to encourage drivers to use public transport. Austrians are already ahead of most of Europe in this, but it still accounted for only 16% of journeys made in 2018. The government hopes that sharing most of the cost amongst the whole population via taxation will be a major step in reducing car use.

Matt Finch from the European Federation for Transport and Environment commented, "The reason it's so cheap in Austria is because it's been virtually completely funded by the taxpayer. Here, we're a lot further the other way."

TRANSPORT AND CLIMATE:

putting in place the right incentives

*Transform Scotland director, **Colin Howden**, discusses the necessity of cutting transport emissions in order to reach our climate targets, and how we might go about achieving this.*

FoFNL is a member of Transform Scotland

Transport is the toughest problem in hitting Scotland's climate targets. In recent years, it has become the largest source of emissions, and despite an unceasing flow of consultations and policies, there has been precisely no progress in cutting emissions since 1990.

In order to hit our national climate commitments it is imperative we see deep cuts in transport emissions. But that's about as far as there is consensus in political discussions of transport currently.

Follow a transport debate in the Parliament and you will find many who think that transport emissions can be magicked away by some cycle paths, a handful of bus lanes and a few tram lines. That is all a convenient fiction. The ScotRail trains that have been in state ownership since April 1 are exactly the same as they were under private sector ownership on 31 March, and whether owned by communists or capitalists, nobody's going to get on the bus if it's stuck behind long queues of single-occupant-filled private cars.

Investment in sustainable transport infrastructure is a necessary component of a sustainable transport policy — something which my organisation has campaigned for decades — but it is foolish to think that transport investment will be sufficient to deliver major cuts in emissions in the absence of the correct incentives also being in place.

It's certainly true that the shift from fossil fuels to electricity for powering the car fleet has cut emissions (although this gain has been eroded by people driving more and buying larger vehicles), and electric cars will continue to play a massively important role. However, the electrification of fleets is not sufficient to deliver the necessary carbon reductions so a reduction

of road mileage will be required in addition to the shift to electric vehicles. The Scottish Government has recognised this in the introduction of its target to reduce car mileage by 20% by 2030.

This traffic reduction target represents a very significant change of course from the Scottish Ministers. For the previous decade, we had been told that electric vehicles would bring about the climate cuts required. This had been a convenient position to take as it relied upon European Union legislation to drive cuts in the emissions from the domestic vehicle fleet, and enabled inaction elsewhere.

It's economically rational for people to drive

There are many reasons why people choose to drive. However, I suspect the principal reason is because it is massively under-priced.

HM Treasury collects around £35bn per annum in Fuel Duty and Vehicle Excise Duty across the UK. That may sound like a lot but it is dwarfed by the £99bn in external costs that road transport inflicts, which represents almost 5% of UK GDP¹. It's a vast cost burden borne by society and the environment: congestion, road crashes, climate impacts, air and noise pollution, and damage to wildlife, soils and habitats. There's simply no instance of the 'hard-pressed motorist' when in fact motorists pay for only a third of the damage that they inflict.

But it's difficult to castigate people for driving when the price signals that they face on a day-to-day basis provide a direct incentive to car use. Transport prices have been favouring the move from public transport to cars for decades, with motoring becoming ever cheaper compared to the cost of living, and public transport becoming substantially more costly².

This trend has affected the poorest in Scotland

most adversely. Bus travel is disproportionately used by people on lower incomes while higher car use is associated with higher income. So while people on lower incomes are being hit by increasing transport costs, people on higher incomes are benefiting from lower costs.

Government policy has exacerbated these price trends. While the UK Government has frozen fuel duty for eleven years, it has remorselessly pursued annual above-inflation increases in rail fares.

Putting in place the right incentives

So it seems to me that there are two courses of action that can be followed: reducing public transport fares and increasing the cost of driving. These are not mutually exclusive, but only one of these will deliver transformative change in traffic levels and transport emissions.

Firstly, we can make public transport affordable. The Scottish Government has committed to a 'Fair Fares Review', and we await details. However, with the commitment for free bus travel for the under-22s, the Government has already indicated that it is prepared to intervene on price in order to drive change.

Furthermore, the Government set an earlier precedent when it introduced the Road Equivalent Tariff for ferry services, which takes as its founding principle that public transport use should be no more expensive than an equivalent road journey. So if it's good enough for ferries then why not apply the same principle for bus and rail travel? This would be a logical place to start the Review, but it remains to be seen whether the Scottish Government will be prepared to consider this.

The principal impediment to cheaper — or perhaps even entirely free — public transport is public finance. Who exactly is going to pay? The Government argues that the rail fares increases are both to recoup both the vast cost of maintaining the railway during the pandemic and the subsequent declines in demand due to increased home working. Meanwhile, free bus travel for the under-22s won't come cheaply, while the move from fossil fuel to electric cars is beginning to further hollow out the tax revenues that the Treasury receives.

Of course, the Scottish Government could


choose to direct some of the further £7bn that it intends to spend on new road-building over the next decade into subsidising public transport use. But the Scottish Ministers remain firmly wedded to new high-carbon roads, and are being egged on to build even more by their Labour and Tory political opponents, again from unidentified sources of finance.

So the second option — and the one that it is imperative to pursue irrespective of what is done with public transport fares — is to put in place a national system of road pricing. Only this provides the opportunity of discouraging unnecessary driving in targeted areas or at targeted times, while also providing an income stream that could be used to provide improved public transport services.

Last month, the House of Commons transport committee warned of the financial and environmental consequences of the failure to pursue road pricing and called for an urgent reform of motoring taxation.

But it remains to be seen how this debate will play out in Scotland. While the Labour and Tory MPs who populate the House of Commons transport committee have come out firmly in favour of road pricing, their Scottish counterparts on the Holyrood transport committee have recently stridently fought much more modest proposals for workplace parking levy powers for local authorities.

My worry is that we've been here before. Right back at the start of the Parliament, in 1999, the then Labour government brought in powers for local road pricing schemes. In 2005, Edinburgh tried but failed to implement congestion charging. But since: nothing. We've known about climate change since well before then, but investment has instead prioritised high-carbon infrastructure and the debate around transport incentives is now in a comprehensively more poisonous state than it was in 1999. So, twenty years on, and in the face of a climate crisis, are our politicians prepared to be less blinkered in their consideration of our multiple and overlapping transport crises?

1. Handbook on the external costs of transport - European Commission 2019 
2. Transport price index - RAC Foundation

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Question S6W-05589: Neil Bibby, Scottish Labour Party, West Scotland, answered on 21 January 2022

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will simplify rail ticketing for end-to-end journeys under the new ScotRail operator and, if so, what steps it will take to achieve this.

Graeme Dey, Minister for Transport:

Our priority is for a seamless transition for passengers and staff throughout the transition to ScotRail Trains Ltd from 1 April and during the business' first year of operation. We have empowered ScotRail to review its range of fares offerings to respond to changing travel behaviours due to the impacts of the Covid pandemic, and as part of this work to seek to simplify fares where possible as part of an improved service to passengers.

In addition, the Fair Fares Review, which is currently in its planning stages, is being undertaken by Transport Scotland to ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares in the future.

Question S6W-05989: Mark Ruskell, Scottish Green Party, Mid Scotland and Fife, answered on 14 February 2022

To ask the Scottish Government what correspondence it has had with (a) rail unions and (b) other stakeholders in the last 12 months on developing new rail freight routes and services.

Jenny Gilruth, Minister for Transport:

The Scottish Government routinely receives correspondence from a range of stakeholders including those who are interested in growing rail freight. With regard to rail unions specifically, ASLEF wrote in November 2021 to the then Minister for Transport, and this was followed by a meeting in January to discuss rail freight growth. At this meeting, the Minister invited ASLEF to attend a rail freight industry roundtable meeting on 28 January, chaired by the Director of Rail at Transport Scotland, to discuss how opportunities for rail freight growth can be harnessed.

The Low Carbon Logistics Conference held during COP26 at Mossend also provided the ideal platform to showcase the low carbon transition in the rail and road sectors and how the rail freight industry can help to decarbonise the overall logistics sector.

Question S6W-06139: Christine Graham, Scottish National Party, Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale, answered on 3 March 2022

To ask the Scottish Government, in light of changes in work patterns and increased hybrid working impacting on commuting, whether it will consider, as part of ScotRail moving into public ownership, liaising with VisitScotland to discuss increasing tourism on the rail network by combining rail tickets with discounted entrance charges to participating national attractions.

Jenny Gilruth:

VisitScotland already works closely with ScotRail as a key national partner. The relationship includes liaising on matters relating to the visitor experience and running joint marketing campaigns, including a spring 2022 campaign to promote family days out in Scotland's cities.

ScotRail Trains Limited have been charged with producing a Market Growth Strategy, from April 2022, that develops and implements appropriate products and services to address post-Covid markets including, in particular, tourism. To assist with the development of that strategy and in furtherance of the relationship that exists between ScotRail and VisitScotland. I have asked my

officials to establish with them what more can be done to promote tourism and, in particular, actions to encourage visits to national attractions by rail.

Question S6W-06565: Neil Bibby, Scottish Labour Party, West Scotland, answered on 21 March 2022

To ask the Scottish Government (a) what the timescale is and (b) which groups it will consult for its "national conversation" about the future of ScotRail.

Jenny Gilruth:

Due to the local elections period, it is expected that the national rail conversation will get underway after 5 May local elections. Decisions on a more definitive timescale will be arrived at when agreement has been reached with Trade Union partners and other interested stakeholders.

It is envisaged that the national conversation will engage a wide ranging group of stakeholders including passengers, regional transport partnerships, rail unions, disability groups, businesses and educational interests.

Transport Scotland officials are currently considering the details on the most effective and productive engagement programme to deliver the national rail conversation.

Question S6W-07580: Finlay Carson, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, Galloway and West Dumfries, answered on 14 April 2022

To ask the Scottish Government what additional resources will be made available for rural transport infrastructure.

Jenny Gilruth:

The Scottish Government ambitions for future investment in rural transport infrastructure are included in the 45 draft recommendations within the second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2), published on the 20 January 2022. The recommendations form the future transport infrastructure investment priorities for Scotland over the next twenty years and cover the whole country with a focus on active travel; bus priority; getting more freight onto rail; improving the safety and resilience of the transport network and the decarbonisation of the transport system. STPR2 provides the necessary evidence base required to help secure the future funding of these projects, including those that have potential to transform the way we travel in rural areas.

More specifically, STPR2 recommends investment in Demand Responsive Transport and Mobility as a Service (MaaS) to support improved public transport connectivity, including in rural areas where conventional fixed route services may not be suitable or viable. In addition, much of Scotland's rural population resides in towns and villages and there are a number of draft active travel recommendations for these settlements. This includes connecting towns and villages, improving active travel on trunk roads through communities and long distance active travel networks.

Investing in our Trunk Road and Motorway network is important in order to improve safety and resilience of the network for the communities and businesses of Scotland. STPR2 recommendations for strategic roads focus on safety, climate change adaptation and resilience. For safety improvements these will be a primary, but not exclusive, focused on rural sections. Specifically for South West Scotland, STPR2 recommends that safety, resilience and reliability improvements are made on the A75 and A77 strategic road corridors, in turn supporting placemaking opportunities. While to encourage greater use of public transport and support wider town regeneration proposals, STPR2 recommends that consideration should also be given to upgrading or relocating Stranraer rail station.

FREIGHT MULTIPLE UNIT?

Now that it's vital for all in the railway industry to focus on exactly how the modal shift demands of the Climate Emergency can be met, innovative thinking could come in handy.

Here's an example from the beginning of this century. Taking a cue from the unsuccessful German *CargoSprinter* of 1996, a joint venture between Coventry University and TruckTrain Developments Ltd produced a promising take on the Freight Multiple Unit.



Artist's impression from TruckTrain website

Each vehicle would have had a driving cab at both ends, unlike the *CargoSprinter* which had a motorised vehicle at each end with flat wagons in between. The *TruckTrain* would have been able to carry standard containers, swap-bodies or pallets. Each car could have carried 40-60 tonnes and was designed to be formed into a train of 2-7 cars. Performance would have been similar to a passenger multiple unit, with a maximum speed of 100mph. All axles on each vehicle would have been powered to deliver the acceleration and braking required.

There would have been full on-board monitoring of location, vehicle condition, cargo condition and cargo security, along with automatic communication to the shipper's base.



This project appears to have foundered, but in the new situation where almost everything currently carried by lorries needs to be looked at for potential transfer to rail, it is easy to imagine such a train providing a useful service where smaller consignments could easily be combined.

However, all new freight developments will have to be based on overhead electrification, supplemented by batteries for non-electrified sections of route. This will represent quite a challenge for the designers FoFNL hopes are beavering away on something like this. Perhaps a three-car unit would be a necessary compromise.

[www](http://www.fofnl.com)

Ian Budd

A CargoSprinter unit was ordered in 2001 from the German manufacturer, Windhoff, by the Australian CRT Group. It is seen on 6 February 2004 on a dual-gauge (4'8½"/5'3") section between Middle Footscray and West Footscray stations, heading west out of Melbourne. A tri-weekly service from Melbourne to Wodonga ran for a while from 2003. Photo: Dermis50

CYRIL BLEASDALE OBE 1934-2022

Cyril Bleasdale who died on 27 March had a wide-ranging career with British Rail which took him from heading InterCity and London Midland Region to finally being director of ScotRail during the four years up to the start of privatisation in 1994.

At ScotRail he inherited the declining fortunes of the early 1990s with the economic situation requiring cuts to be made and projects such as the Alloa reopening to be put on hold. Nevertheless he made the best of the situation by commending the new fleet of lightweight diesel Class 158 trains to the Scottish business community through the retrofitting of First Class compartments complete with specially commissioned artworks. He also showed their high-speed capability by arranging a high-speed run on one in May 1992 which took 32.5 minutes to cover the 47 miles from Glasgow to Edinburgh.

On retiring he did not rest on his laurels and came to the rescue of the much-loved BR staff newspaper *Railnews* whose website today carries this message:

We greatly regret to report the death of Railnews chairman Cyril Bleasdale OBE. Cyril, who was 87, was one of the founding owners of Railnews Ltd

when the title was acquired from the British Railways Board in 1996, and served as managing director until last year.

Cyril knew how to use publicity to achieve what he wanted. His decision in the face of budgetary cuts to give the Forth Bridge a maintenance "holiday" reverberated around the world. And when the building on the island platform at Aviemore - where the station is the village's only listed building - began to sag, he announced its demolition in the knowledge that heritage authorities would come to its rescue - today beautifully restored with the help of the Railway Heritage Trust, it is shared by ScotRail with the Strathspey Railway. He once recalled as a young man in British Transport Advertising coming to join a dinner of the BR Scottish Region top team at which as the wine flowed faster the talk got ever wilder of stripping out every last bit of potentially redundant infrastructure - evidently a formative experience for one who would go on to show respect for the railway's inheritance, the fine Edwardian building at Inverurie being another example of a station that he conserved during his time at ScotRail.



John Yellowlees



Aviemore Station - Photo: Karl Oparka

AN INVITATION TO THE DELAYED 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE OPENING OF THE DUKE OF SUTHERLAND'S RAILWAY

A FOLLOW-ON EVENT AFTER THE

FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE AGM & CONFERENCE

Helmsdale, Friday June 17th & Saturday 18th 2022

The Duke of Sutherland's Railway: the longest stretch of railway anywhere in Britain planned and financed by one individual, celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2021. The anniversary event, delayed by the pandemic, has split into two occasions, one at each end of his line. The first was held last August when Prince Charles was invited to unveil a Red Wheel plaque at Dunrobin Station. [The Red Wheel Scheme was created by the National Transport Trust to recognise and commemorate the most significant sites of historical importance to transport heritage in the United Kingdom].

Still to come, a more extended event in Helmsdale on 17th and 18th June 2022 open to all. Here is the programme; the Friday evening and Saturday morning events will be held in the Timespan Heritage & Arts Centre (shortlisted for the 2021 Art Fund Museum of the Year Award).

Friday 19:30 - 21:00

- Folk music celebrating Sutherland and the coming of the Railway, in Timespan

Saturday 10:00 – 12:30

- *Railway Aspects of the Anniversary* - Keith Fenwick (Author & Editor *Highland Railway Journal*)
- *Helmsdale Station, Charles Drake, and the Third Duke's enthusiasm for concrete buildings [Helmsdale Station being one]* - David Scott-Cowan (great grandson of Charles Drake)
- *Brora and the Duke's Railway* - Nick Lindsay (Chair, Clyne Heritage Society, Brora)
- *Looking ahead: the Far North Line Community Rail Partnership* - David Watson (Trust Manager, Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust) Chair: John Yellowlees, ScotRail Honorary Rail Ambassador

13:00

- Lunch in Timespan

14:00

- At Helmsdale Station: *An introduction to the journey ahead*, Daniel Brittain-Catlin

14:21 – 16:36

- Rail travel along the Duke's line to Dunrobin with an opportunity to visit to the station museum at Dunrobin (courtesy of Daniel Brittain-Catlin)

16:40 – 18:00

- Afternoon Tea at Helmsdale Station and meeting place for railway staff who have recollections of working on the Far North Line

Places are limited and booking is required. A booking fee of £10 will include admission to the Friday and Saturday Timespan events and an electronic copy of the window view line guide of the Duke's Railway prepared for the occasion. A light evening meal on Friday, and morning refreshments and lunch on Saturday will be provided in Timespan at small extra charge.

Because there are no suitably timed trains or buses leaving Dingwall for Helmsdale after the FoFNL

AGM & Conference, Helmsdale Community Transport will provide a 16 seater minibus departing Dingwall at **15:45** – journey time approx. 80 minutes. A donation of £8 will be requested. Grateful thanks to Friends of the Far North Line for subsidising this service.

For those requiring overnight accommodation a list of Helmsdale hotels, and B&Bs can be provided. A group travel ticket in reserved seats is planned for the travel along the line to Dunrobin on the Saturday. We need to know the number of participants joining the group by May 18th. For further details, and a booking form, contact Michael Willmot at helmsdalestation@gmail.com or phone 01743 588654.

A NEW MEANING TO BECOMING A STATIONMASTER!



Helmsdale Station CIC is seeking new directors

Helmsdale Station Community Interest Company has been trading for eight years providing self catering accommodation in Station House, Helmsdale. Currently the directors give their time on a voluntary basis; as a result, the CIC is able to give around £4,000 p.a. of trading surplus to local charities and community causes in Helmsdale and to promoting the Far North Line and low carbon travel initiatives in Caithness and Sutherland.

We now seek a person, or people, to assist the running of the business, with a view to succession in due course – including overseeing the bookings, accounts, Companies House returns, publicity and maintenance. This might be a single role, or several. An honorarium of up to £2,000 could be offered plus an entitlement of some weeks of free accommodation at the station each year; details to be discussed with the existing directors.

Details of the project and the accommodation are at www.helmsdalestation.co.uk

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

For further information and expressions of interest, contact Michael Willmot at helmsdalestation@gmail.com

ROLLER COASTER RAILWAY

This rather alarming telephoto lens view was taken on 23 January 2022.

The Inverness-Georgemas Junction PLPR (plain line pattern recognition) test train, hauled by 37219, approaches the end of its journey.



Photo: Leon Gray

MEMORIES OF BORROBOL HALT

When I recently read in *The Scotsman* that a new electronic system was to be introduced for request stops on the Far North Line, memories came flooding back about my childhood experience of stopping trains. At present at such request stops one has to wave one's hand to stop a train but back then there was a signal which we had to use. My interest was further piqued by seeing a copy of a photo of Borrobol Halt (opposite) complete with signal, which had prompted Frank Roach of HITRANS to plan the new system.

I was born and brought up on Borrobol Hill sheep farm in the Strath of Kildonan, through which the Inverness-Wick/Thurso line runs. Borrobol Halt (long since gone) had a platform and a waiting room with a railway phone which was useful in emergencies before telephone lines arrived. There was also a siding into which trucks would be shunted, either for bringing bales of hay for winter feed or so that we could load sheep and lambs to transport them to the sales in Lairg.

When I started school in 1949 my older brother Colin, and I, went by train to Kildonan Primary, four miles away. We would walk or cycle about half a mile to the station and then a little farther from Kildonan station up to the school (closed years ago). We had to set the signal by removing a hook and chain that held a lever so that the signal came to rest horizontally. The guard would ask us, or anyone else present, to replace the hook and chain to make sure the next train would not stop unnecessarily. One of them used to say, "Mind the stickie (Remember the lever)!" I still remember the excitement of being able to bring the great steam engine to a halt. On the return journey we had to ask the guard in good time to stop the train.

This arrangement continued for a few years until road transport was provided. During lunch break we boys often went down to the station and saw the station office, where the "tablet" that was exchanged with the engine driver was put in a machine which was part of a very good safety system. Then we would visit the signal box and watch them being set. Sometimes permanent way workers would give us a ride on their little trolley, used when they did work on the line. Health and Safety would not allow that nowadays!

Although my father had a car, the railway was very important to us. When the great snowstorms hit the Far North in January and February 1955¹, lasting until early April, it was a lifeline. At mid-morning on 12th January, while we were in school, the first storm arrived suddenly with huge amounts of drifting snow driven by a strong wind. The Strath road was soon blocked and my younger brother and I were taken down to the station on foot to catch a train. The line further North was already blocked, so they had to arrange a snow plough to come up and take us to Borrobol and then further on to unblock the line. At Borrobol we were met by our mother and a neighbour, Angus Kennedy, who escorted us home in the teeth of blinding drift. The snow was up to my knees and Angus had to carry Alex on his back. My father was away at the tup² sale in Dingwall and had his own difficulties in getting home by road. He came next day on a snowplough from Helmsdale.

After a few days I became very unwell and I went by rail to Golspie Hospital, where I had an



emergency appendicectomy by Dr Bertie Simpson. When I got home I had to stay off school for a month, but towards the end of February there was an even worse snowstorm and I had to be off school for three months - and that was the year I sat the Qualifying Exam! It was during this storm that we had the excitement of *Operation Snowdrop*, in which RAF *Shackletons*³ dropped bales of hay when our winter feed in Aultanduin ran out.



As I grew older, I went to Golspie Senior Secondary School and then Edinburgh University to study Medicine and Surgery and the railway was usually the mode of transport. As in many other cases, the railway was the way out of the Highlands, but not the way to return permanently. Thereafter most of my rail travel was in India, where I spent 15 happy years as a medical missionary of the Free Church of Scotland. I saw many steam locomotives, some of them built in Britain, but they were constantly being replaced by Indian diesel and electric ones. Every time I hear a train hooter I call to mind previous eventful railway journeys in India and the thrill of bringing the massive steam engine to a halt with the Borrobool signal.

(Rev Dr) Donald M MacDonald

¹ See article on p24. ² Male sheep - ram.

³ Maritime patrol aircraft, second generation descendant of wartime *Lancaster* bombers.

CATERING TROLLEYS RETURN

ScotRail on-train hospitality has been shut down during the pandemic. The ScotRail hospitality team was redeployed to other areas of the business, such as touch-point cleaning on trains and in stations and many found permanent posts elsewhere on the railway.

From 4 April on-train catering started to be

reintroduced. ScotRail has initiated a near £1m recruitment drive to find and train staff needed to provide a full service.

The service is being reintroduced on the Far North Line as well as other services in the Highlands.

LOCAL COMMUNICATION

Network Rail plans to build a 30m radio communications mast at Muir of Ord Station.

The mast is part of a £5m development project to extend and improve the Far North Line's radio communications network which is used for signalling and, in the future, control of points which are currently train-operated. This will remove the 15 mph speed restriction currently in place at passing loops.

Network Rail hosted video Q&A sessions which local residents were invited to attend. Cara Healy, Network Rail's project manager for the work, said, "We appreciate local people may have some initial questions when they hear we are installing a 30-metre mast at the station, but we hope the opportunity to talk with us directly will help clarify any issues and alleviate concerns."

THE NORTH'S WORST WINTER FOR 25 YEARS

FoFNL member and Convener of Transform Scotland's Policy Forum, Paul Tetlaw, found this article in a 1955 copy of Trains Illustrated magazine - the forerunner of Modern Railways, whose current editor will be speaking to us at our AGM & Conference.

Our railway is famous for its regular tussles with snow, and even made international news in 1978 when around 70 passengers had to be rescued from a stranded train by helicopter! See photo from Steve Morris Collection at foot of article.

We couldn't find a photo of the events described, but there is a wonderful British Transport Film documentary made on February 24th the same year in the North of England called Snowdrift at Bleath Gill. The first two photos in this article are stills from that film and there is a link to it on this issue's companion web page.

The bitter weather of last January and February played havoc with train services on some of the more exposed sections of British Railways. In Caithness and Sutherland, especially, the blizzard of Wednesday, January 12, produced the worst conditions experienced in that district for 25 years. Winds of 60 m.p.h. and more drove the snow into great drifts, notably on the line from Helmsdale to Wick and Thurso; this rises to a height of 700 ft. above sea level on the Caithness moors.

the snowbound passengers and crew. By this time the snowdrifts at Bower station had reached a depth of 25 ft. Two other passenger trains, one at Georgemas and one at Altnabreac, had also become firmly wedged in deep drifts, and 50 passengers were now stranded.

By late afternoon on Thursday, January 13, all three trains had been freed from the drifts and the passengers were all at Georgemas. The Engineer's Department dormitory coach there had become the "Station Hotel" and some 50 passengers and 50 members of the railway staff dined in relays. Contact was again restored by rail between Georgemas and Wick early on Friday, January 14, and between Georgemas and Thurso by noon that day. During the clearing operations considerable saving in time taken to clear points was achieved by the use of flame guns.

During the night of February 16/17 snowstorm conditions returned with renewed fury to the North-East of Scotland, and from all reports it was the worst in living memory. On the morning of February 17 several trains were brought to a stand in deep snow - the 1.55 a.m. Inverness to Perth freight train at Slochd; the 3.20 a.m. Inverness to Perth freight at Tomatin; the 5.15 a.m. Inverness to Wick freight, north of Lairg; and a snowplough from Wick was deeply



A shuttle service of snow ploughs was maintained between Helmsdale and Wick during the worst period, but despite this the 3.40 p.m. passenger train from Wick to Inverness on January 12 stuck in a deep drift at Bower station. A relief train from Wick with permanent way staff eventually managed to reach a spot half a mile from the stranded train, from which point the staff proceeded on foot with food for

embedded 1½ miles north of Georgemas. The Helmsdale snowplough, which left Helmsdale at 5.42 p.m. on the 17th, passed Forsinard at 7.42 p.m. and nothing more was heard of it until it was located 2½ miles north of Forsinard by a member of the staff who had walked out to find it, taking 4 hours over the 2½ miles there and back. The 3.10 p.m. passenger train from Inverness to Tain, carrying 42 passengers, became stuck at Alness and the passengers were accommodated in the station buildings overnight. After the line had been cleared the passengers went forward to Tain at 10.35 a.m. on the 18th.

A special train with permanent way staff which left Inverness about 10.0 p.m. on the 17th managed to free the stranded 5.15 a.m. freight from Inverness, by 7.0 p.m. on the 18th. The Engineers' train then went forward to Helmsdale, where it arrived at 10.0 p.m., having ploughed through drifts up to 12 feet high between Lairg and Helmsdale. On Saturday, February 19, this special train returned to Inverness, clearing stations and loop lines on the way. A second special train with permanent way men from Inverness which reached Helmsdale on Friday night attacked the route between Helmsdale and Georgemas on Saturday

morning and, having ploughed through deep drifts up to 500 yards long, reached Forsinard at 2.0 p.m. North of Forsinard the first snowplough ran into a deep drift 120 yards long, and by the time it was released no further progress could be made on Saturday.



The nine-mile stretch of line between Altnabreac and Scotscladder was the only length still to be cleared on Sunday morning and some 200 men were concentrated with snowploughs to the north and south of the area. The break-through was made at 2.30 p.m. on Sunday, February 20, and after further ploughing between these points, the whole line between Perth and Wick and Thurso was again open.



ARDGAY SIGNAL BOX:

HUNG, DRAWN AND NEWLY QUARTERED

Signal boxes are some of the best-loved icons of Britain's historic railways.

Dave Goulder recounts how he saved the redundant Ardgay Signal Box from "death row".

"**Dave, Dave, do you know** – they're going to burn the Ardgay Signal Box? They've smashed and burned the boxes in Tain and Dingwall; Ardgay is next." This anxious call from a friend in Tain was enough to send me scurrying down to Ardgay to check the situation. This was February 1992. Radio signalling had been introduced on the north line and proved to be successful thus rendering the old mechanical signal equipment redundant, so the fate of all the signal boxes was to have the roof smashed open, the lever frames hauled out, then the wooden shell was set alight. This was British Rail's dismissal of one hundred years of Highland railway history. What to do about it?



The Ardgay box had been given a temporary reprieve by turning it into a workmen's bothy, the lever frame dispatched to the National Railway Museum in York and a new floor laid for the linemen to sit on. However, all those small windowpanes proved too much of a temptation for kids with missiles, so the railway men hardly used it and British Rail went back to plan A.

It took a couple of phone calls for me to be granted an audience with the Royalty of Her Majesty's Railways at Inverness station but after a bit of statutory manoeuvring we had a deal. The Ardgay signal box was mine.

The move was scheduled for a Sunday in April when there were no trains. I would hire a crane and a flatbed lorry from Bannermans and we

would transport the box by road to my home in Rosehall. The police would escort the circus as it would be a wide load on the single track A837 and BR would provide a flagman to warn any rogue trains that had slipped unnoticed on to the line while the Inverness Station Master's back was turned. I was to pay the flagman's wage for this vital Sunday workload.



With the help of a couple of builder friends I prepared the box for its airborne adventure and subsequent excursion, all set for Donnie the Crane to lift it from the plinth and thus start the procession to Rosehall.

It was a little like the conclusion of *Peter and the Wolf* or *Carnival of the Animals*. First the police car to frighten oncoming traffic into passing places, then the crane looking like some iron dinosaur pursuing the police car and following that was the flatbed Scottish Scampi lorry with the pride of Ardgay riding high through the trees. Then came the car carrying a rather nervous Dave and family followed by a van containing the helpers who would re-site the box onto its new plinth at Monument Wood, Rosehall.



The small car park at the house necessitated a bit of creative manoeuvring by the two large vehicles. Side by side whilst the box was lifted, then the truck withdrew and 'Ardgay' was placed on the ground till the crane was in position to lift and fit it onto its new temporary plinth of railway sleepers, helped into place by what seemed to be half the population of the village.

Centenary celebration

The next few weeks saw the building a new stone base (the original had been brick). Stone was cheaper and I sort of understand it better than brick. Sixty-three new panes of glass had to be cut and fitted but word had spread that Dave was looking for glass and there seemed to be a daily drop off of old glass by people I didn't even know. (Thank you again if you are reading

this.)

The original steps and outer deck had deteriorated so were replaced. I had to construct my first set of wooden steps but I did have the old ones to copy. New paint in ScotRail blue and white, then all was ready for the one hundredth birthday in 1994 with the lower door wide open to show the signatures of the porter-signalmen from 1919. Bowler hat and bow tie for me, period dress for friends and family, then Lily Byron cut the tape and all retired for drams upstairs. I hadn't told anyone that I had wired up a pair of speakers hidden away under seats with a tape recorder downstairs. The relaxed company heard a distant whistle followed by a steam train rushing past in glorious stereo. I enjoyed that.

Dave Goulder



Railway Worker, by Dave Goulder

*100 years old – useless now, condemned
to be hanged, drawn and quartered,
limbs and guts removed and shown
for all to see.
Even your windowed eyes smashed
by urchins.
Then you will be burned.*

*Your contemporaries, Dingwall and Tain,
[already broken,
consumed by fire and now part of history.
Books will be written for
and by the faithful.
But you will be ashes; the executioners
are already starting work, so prepare.*

*But what is this? Reprive or rescue
shackles shaken clear. You are lifted
high and placed secure
on the getaway vehicle, trundling
along the A837
to green woods
and quiet air, standing high
again, eyes renewed
colour restored,
new bowels with lovely heat
and light.
No longer by the lineside
watching trains go by,
controlling points.
Dignity regained
you are retired.*

WWW

Following on from our last issue's ambulatory nod to the long gone Wick & Lybster Railway by David Fasken, here is another tribute, this time in verse.

The Yarrows Heritage Trust, which was instrumental in preserving Thrumster Station, has a copy of the poem and believes it may have been written by a lady named Ryrrie - they would love to know more!

The line closed in 1944 and the poem is written in the vernacular. There is not room here to explain any of the words, except 'Week', which is how Wick residents pronounce the name of their town. Worth explaining too that the reference in verse 3 to "dry" was because the sale of alcohol in Wick was prohibited from 1922-47!

The best way to appreciate the poem is to listen to it being read. There is a recording, made in 2016, on the Wick Society website. A link to it is on this issue's companion web page.

[www](http://www.wickheritage.com)

'E POOR WEE LYBSTER TRAIN

Some sing o' ships and flying bombs

'At hurtle through 'e air;

Some lek til praise 'e racehorse

'E greyhound or 'e hare

But o' a' 'e things that ever sped

In air, or land or sea

There's only wan 'at I wid choose

'E Lybster Train for me.

Hid wisnae chust an ornar train

'At rins wi a' 'e shither

'At has til wait in sidings

Til mak room for anither

Hid hed a line all til hidsel

Hid hed five stations too

An deil a thing til hould hid back

Except an anteran coo.

Hid didnae gie a scrap for win'

Or hail or time or rain

But chooged awa' contented lek

Til Week – an back again

Hid wandered on hid's canny way

Though "Speed" was some folk's cry,

But fa wid want til tear til Week

So long as Week was dry?

'E trains 'at run doon in 'e sooth

Are no 'e trains I lek

For if ye want til catch them

Ye nearly brak yer neck

But wi' 'e Lybster trainie

Ye didna need til mind,

If Geordie saw ye comin'

Ye werna left behind.

Hid carried kings and commoners,

Fenders and fountain pens

An' doos an' dougs an' doormats

An' coos an' clockan hens

We took hid jest for granted

Thocht hid wid aye rin on

But fortune wis against us

An' noo wer train is gone.

They said hid didna pey hid's wey

They said hid wisna worth

To those in high authority

Hid cumbered up the earth,

An' noo, in place o' a' hid's dird

An' cheerful homely din,

There's nothing bit 'e scorie's cry

An' weary whistlan win.

But foremost in ma memories

O' pleasure or o' pain

I'll gie a place o' honour til

Ma poor wee Lybster Train.

STABILISATION WORKS

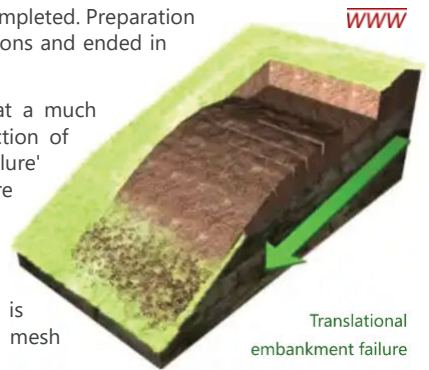


A large stabilisation project near Tain has now been completed. Preparation work began in September with night-time line occupations and ended in February.

Victorian era railway embankments were often built at a much steeper angle than is allowed nowadays, and this section of cutting was affected by what's known as 'translational failure' when sections of the top layer break contact with a more stable layer below and begin to slide downwards (see diagram).

There are three other kinds of landslip and each requires different remediation. A translational failure is stabilised by using 'soil nails' to attach a high tensile mesh facing incorporating erosion-control matting.

This cutting is around 600m long and up to 10.5m high. Rope access operatives using bespoke drilling equipment installed 1,800 nails, up to 6m in length.



At this stage this is not the prettiest look, but in time vegetation will probably grow through the mesh.

Network Rail contracted the work to specialist company QTS Group (<https://www.qtsgroup.com/>)

Photos: QTS



BOOK REVIEW

Scotland's Lost Branch Lines [www](http://www.birlinn.com)

Where Beeching Got it Wrong

David Spaven, Birlinn, March 2022

ISBN: 9781839830198 Hardback: 320pp. £30.00

This is not a book of reminiscences about the good old days or the "Golden Age of Railways". Far from it, David Spaven analyses the reasons used for the Beeching closures, and the processes and their participants in great depth, making it a thoughtful and thought-provoking volume. Reading it, one is filled with a feeling partly of anger, but mostly regret. Politicians and planners in the early 60s almost universally had no concept that they might be wrong about the future of transport. The few exceptions, including importantly David's father Frank, expressed views which must have seemed surprising to most at the time. That railways are not profit-making entities but often address social need and foster economic development, was not in most people's thoughts. Nor was the concept of safeguarding the closed railway routes understood by more than a few, who knew that they might be needed in the future, but were completely ignored.

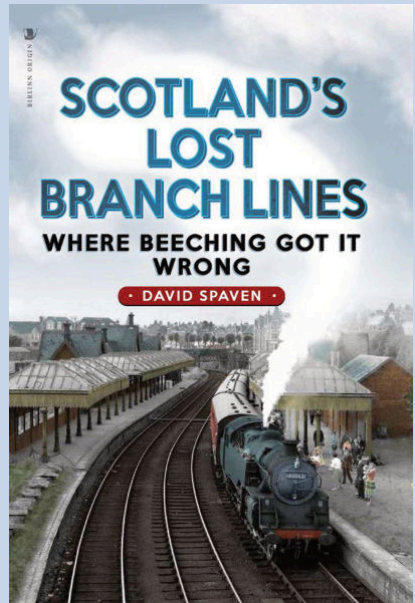
This is a careful and deeply researched look at what happened: the sheer incompetence with which the whole process was handled is very disappointing, and almost none of the participants deserve any credit.

The wilful disregard of opportunities to run the threatened routes more economically, instead of complete closure, is shocking, especially as one of the most guilty parties was BR itself, which seemed to be intent on a massive act of self-harm.

This is a very readable account and David brings in other eminent commentators, such as David Prescott, Rae Montgomery and John Yellowlees, throughout the book, to give their own angle on particular decisions.

Scotland's Lost Branch Lines is in two parts: Part One, *The birth, life and death of Scotland's branch lines*, is a wide-ranging study of the history that led to the railway system in Scotland.

Part Two, *A dozen closures dissected*, is a detailed narrative of the closure process of selected lines and



shows, among other things, how the BR staff who actually operated the railway were mostly far more knowledgeable than those who managed it.

The final chapter contains careful analysis of what part rail could play in the future on the routes whose closure was examined in detail. Acknowledging that a good solution in some cases might be light rail, i.e. TramTrain, David reflects on the possibilities this might hold for bringing certain sizeable communities back into the rail system, where full reopening for 'heavy rail' might have a prohibitive price tag. This would make useful reading for those in charge of the railways in Scotland today, and the politicians whose understanding of such things is essential.

The story is illustrated with many excellent photographs - some featuring the author himself when a little younger!

I recommend this book for anyone who has wondered what really happened when the "Beeching Axe" was wielded. It's very easy to blame Dr Beeching for everything, but *Scotland's Lost Branch Lines* shows that the guilt should be shared far more widely.

Ian Budd

ELECTRIFYING INNOVATION

One of the 30 winners of Innovate UK's First-of-a-Kind 2021 rail competition was a project to design a lighter, cheaper and 'greener' electrification mast.



The design is a joint venture between Furrer+Frey, an international electrification engineering company, Prodrive Composites and university teams at Cranfield, Southampton and Newcastle Universities.

The experimental mast is made from advanced composite materials and has embedded smart sensors which will supply realtime data to inform maintenance schedules, and reduce the need for manual line-side checks.

The masts will weigh around a tenth of the equivalent steel masts, but have the same tensile strength. The composite masts will require piles 1.25m deep as opposed to the minimum so far of 3.7m on the Midland Mainline. Not only will the production process be more environmentally friendly but

installation will be considerably cheaper which, combined with the savings on labour-intensive lineside checks, will make a welcome cost reduction on electrification projects.

With considerable route miles of electrification required in Scotland in the near future, innovative design achievements such as this could make a significant contribution to freeing up funds for other projects, such as dualling the rest of the main intercity routes.

Deutsche Bahn (DB) has announced that it will begin construction of three overhead line 'islands' in Schleswig-Holstein this autumn. The islands will be short stretches from a few hundred metres to a few kilometres. This will allow Battery/Overhead-Electric bi-mode units to charge in transit.



The first new trains will operate in 2023 and the 'island' electrification will enable all diesel trains to be withdrawn in due course. Two other German states are following suit soon: Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia.

Ian Budd

Our back cover features three beautiful pictures of Far North Line landscapes taken by FoFNL member **Niall Laybourne**. It is views like these which set the Far North Line apart from other railways in Scotland.

Top: The 10:41 from Inverness is seen on 18 September 2021 at Clayock, between Georgemas Junction and Watten, on the way to Wick.

Middle: On 19 December 2021 the 11:58 from Wick is seen passing Loch an Ruathair, between Forsinard and Kinbrace.

Bottom: The 14:13 nuclear flask working from Georgemas Junction heads south on 16 September 2021. It is seen climbing away from Kinbrace before descending the 1-in-60 towards the River Helmsdale. Ben Griam More and Ben Griam Beg are seen behind.

FAR NORTH LANDSCAPES

PHOTOS BY NIALL LAYBOURNE

