

# FAR NORTH EXPRESS



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THE MAGAZINE OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

£3.00

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[www.fofnl.org.uk/fne/cps/fne88.html](http://www.fofnl.org.uk/fne/cps/fne88.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](#)

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**Cover Photo:** On 30 October 2022 HST vehicles travelled north of Dingwall for the first time. Class 43 power cars are now attached to Network Rail's Plain Line Pattern Recognition (PLPR) infrastructure monitoring train. See the back cover for Niall Laybourne's photos of the unit, showing off some more of the line's varied scenery.

The train is seen here south of Lairg. **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

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**We are in the middle of a very difficult time** for railways. Between the financial strictures imposed on governments by the pandemic and the inflationary pressures caused partly by the rise in fuel prices as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the one hand, and the dismal extended period of industrial action on the other, it is difficult to look ahead with optimism.

At a time when all efforts should be on building up the railway network as quickly as possible in readiness for the essential modal shift to rail which is in government plans, a shortage of capital funding is the last thing that's needed. Scotland's exceptionally enlightened approach to rail development is in danger of being stymied by the country's lack of ability to borrow to cover the capital spending needed to achieve its climate-related targets.

And then at the same time the public's willingness to go along with transferring many of its journeys to rail is being severely tested with the railways being seen as unreliable, not only because of industrial action but, in the Highlands at least, because the unsatisfactory infrastructure often leads to unrecoverable delays as trains wait at the rare passing loops.

The urgency of electrification to meet decarbonisation targets must not be allowed to postpone the necessary addition of extra capacity. It would be ironic if by 2035 all passenger trains are electrically powered in some form but still have to sit around waiting for a train to pass in the opposite direction.

The lack of passing loops is a severe problem, not only on the Far North Line, but on our neighbouring routes to Aberdeen and Perth. The additional freight envisaged in STPR2 will

make this much worse. None of this is new and was well known in previous decades - right back to the Highland Railway in some cases. The new imperative to transfer traffic to rail makes solving the problem even more urgent.

Worryingly, railway development is often very, very slow. The good news that Inverness Airport Station is about to open is tempered by the knowledge that it has taken 25 years of struggle to achieve this rather obvious outcome.

The results of the Transport Focus survey mentioned in this issue are not in the least surprising. Most passengers put a premium on trains running to time and yet in the Highlands this is currently quite difficult to achieve. The few available passing loops are used to design the best timetables possible which is fine if everything runs on time. However, there's no redundancy, presumably because investment decisions are taken based on making a 'business case' - 'spare' passing loops will not achieve high scores. The same goes for rolling stock and to some extent staffing.

If we are to achieve modal shift of passengers we have to present a fully working railway, the operation of which doesn't fall apart when one train is delayed, or a member of staff is taken ill.

The other main cause of disruption is of course the weather. Network Rail is busy removing the huge number of trees which are too near the track but this won't help when the problem is snow, or even rain. In the past it was always the trains which managed to get through. Perhaps the choice of light multiple units on remote lines was not ideal - a heavy locomotive could tackle significant snowdrifts.

**Ian Budd**

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## FoFNL AGM & CONFERENCE 2023

This year's AGM & Conference will take place on Friday 23 June in Helmsdale. The meeting will be held in Timespan. The AGM will begin at 10:30 and the public conference will follow at 11:15. This year's main speaker will be Chris Gibb who has just completed his tenure as Chief Executive of ScotRail Holdings, the arm's length body responsible to the Scottish Government for the running of Scotland's trains.

We are looking forward to our visit to Timespan which was the venue for last year's celebration of the opening of the Duke of Sutherland's Railway and is a wonderfully interesting place.

# PANDORA

Marshal Stalin, no slouch when it came to mass murder, may or may not have said that “the death of one man is a tragedy. The death of a million men is a statistic”. Mathematicians among Pandora’s readers will be aware of several Laws of Large Numbers in the field of statistical probability. Non-mathematicians will be aware of another, rarely stated but commonly observed: when numbers get big, really big, awfully big, readers lose interest. It’s Stalin, but in a different guise.

We have all read that an awfully big sum of money - £43 billion or thereby - has been lost through fraud, ineptitude or sheer negligence in the supply of useless testing kit during the pandemic. Or was that the sum lost for much the same reasons on useless PPE? That Pandora is in doubt is proof that - let’s call it Stalin’s Law of Large Numbers - is powerful. The numbers are so big that no-one can get their heads round them. Were a piece of government procurement been found to have wasted a sum one could get one’s head round - £250 million, say - then the Opposition (to say nothing of the Daily Mail) would be on the heels of the errant

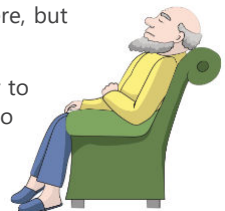
minister without pause. One has only to think of ferries to see the truth of this. But where is the scandal over the £43 billion?

## Pandora ponders Large Numbers

What has this to do with the railway? Since 2004 it had been the UK government’s settled policy (settled in the sense that changes of governing party or parties has seen precisely no change in policy) that fuel duty on petrol has not been increased. According to the current issue of RAIL this is worth some £9 billion this year to motorists, and approaching a total of £100 billion since 2004. At the same time rail fares have increased in most years by 1% more than the Retail Price Index. That’s an increase of over 80%. Government policy is to reduce carbon emissions, and to this end government policy is to encourage motorists out of their cars onto public transport. In order to do this they are asked to pay 80% more to do so while being given £100 billion to stay put. Over-riding government policy - unspoken, but easily inferred - is to avoid annoying motorists, almost all of whom are old enough to vote and cynical enough to do so with their own wallets firmly in the forefront of their minds.

Clearly no government is about to change this habit. Equally clearly there is little sign that government is preparing the ground for the day when petrol (boo!) is so rarely bought that the revenue would not buy the DfT’s biscuits, and electricity (yippee!) is used to fuel cars - with a whopping tax charge. Pandora remembers the jolly processions of three-abreast tractors on the M6 when Mr Blair had the temerity to try to push up fuel duty. Marshal Stalin wasn’t very nice to farmers, and would not have stood for such nonsense, but Mr Blair backed down. Pandora hopes that there is a middle ground somewhere, but then Pandora is famous for having hope.

(Other laws of large numbers tell us that in a city of 8 million it is easy to justify billions on a new bit of railway, whereas - though the benefits to individual passengers might be just as great - it is well-nigh impossible to justify even a few million where folk are thin on the ground.)



# FAIR FARES FOR SCOTLAND

A new report published on 12 December 2022 calls for decisive action to transform the fortunes of Scotland's public transport sector. The report finds that public transport can be complicated, expensive and often fails to sufficiently address accessibility concerns. The report concludes that Scotland should adopt European-style integrated ticketing to ensure public transport is simple, affordable, accessible and reliable.

The Transform Scotland report 'Fair Fares' seeks to inform the Scottish Government's ongoing 'Fair Fares Review'. The report reviews the cost of public vs private transport and the performance of concessionary schemes, sets out funding options, and considers transport poverty and barriers to accessibility. The report finds that the Government's Review must prioritise affordable fares, innovative funding, accessible mobility, and integrated ticketing.

The report was also published a week before the Government's Scottish Budget was presented to Parliament on 15 December, where we would have expected to see financial provision made for the affordable ticketing trials that the Scottish transport minister has promised.

Transform's report is available at: [www.fofnl.org.uk/archives/Fair-Fares-report-Transform-Scotland-December-2022.pdf](http://www.fofnl.org.uk/archives/Fair-Fares-report-Transform-Scotland-December-2022.pdf)

Transform Scotland director **Colin Howden** said:

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

*"We need to make public transport vastly more attractive to many more people. We need this not only to tackle the climate crisis but also to make public transport financially viable for both passengers and taxpayers. To do this, it's critical that we drive up public transport patronage through affordable fares. Failing this, we can only see a spiral of decline for public transport services.*

*"Prior to the pandemic, we were facing a long-run decline in bus patronage and a failing ScotRail franchise. The public transport sector is now also having to navigate the impact of the pandemic on travel patterns and reductions in commuter travel as well as industrial disputes and driver shortages. Meanwhile, the cost-of-living crisis has made public transport less affordable, especially to those on lower incomes.*

*"So it's clear that Scotland must take urgent action to make public transport affordable. When facing similar concerns, Austria introduced a 'Climate Ticket', delivering simple and affordable public transport nationwide. This summer, in a matter of weeks, Germany introduced its '9-Euro-Ticket' as a response to the mounting energy crisis. But we've yet to see any decisive action along these lines in the UK for public transport users, only Westminster's fuel duty cut for car users. It is now time for Scotland to emulate these European examples, and build a climate-friendly transport network which is fair on household budgets."*

The report's key proposal of a simple and affordable 'Fair Fares Card' emulates the Austrian '1-2-3' ticketing system (€1/day locally, €2/day regionally, €3/day nationwide) and allows multi-modal journeys to be made using one ticket at a fixed annual price. By comparison, while Glasgow's SPT ZoneCard holds similarities to the Viennese €365 annual ticket, offering multi-modal mobility for a



fixed price, the price ranges between £815 and £2,929 — up to eight times the price of the Austrian version.

Meanwhile, following Germany’s successful summer trial of its 9-Euro-Ticket, which offered travel on all local and regional public transport for €9/month, on 1 April 2023 the country is introducing a permanent nationwide ‘Deutschlandticket’ offering travel on all local and regional public transport services across Germany for €49/month (or €588 per annum).

In full, the report’s recommendations are:

### 1. AFFORDABLE FARES

Implement a fare structure which ensures that the cost of public transport is equal to, or cheaper than, the cost of driving. Scotland’s Road Equivalent Tariff for the Western Isles proves the feasibility of such a model. This approach must be expanded nationwide to remove the high-cost barriers to modal shift, reduce transport poverty and ensure low-income households can escape ‘forced car ownership’.

### 2. INNOVATIVE FUNDING

Ringfence the revenue from traffic demand management measures (e.g. road pricing & parking levies) to improvements and subsidies for local public transport services, following the international examples outlined in section 6 of this report.

### 3. ACCESSIBLE MOBILITY

Prioritise tackling long standing inequalities and improving social inclusion by:

- Integrating disabled travel schemes into mainstream booking systems to reduce barriers to access.
- Working with local authorities to simplify travel information, scheme application, and eliminate the ‘postcode lottery’ of barriers to travel for disabled people.
- Reimplementing flexible and affordable TaxiCard schemes, in recognition of the fact that taxis remain an essential, but increasingly unaffordable, lifeline for many people.

### 4. INTEGRATED TICKETING

Introduce a national flat fare public transport ‘Fair Fares Card’, emulating the Austrian ‘Klimaticket’ and the German ‘Deutschlandticket’, providing a transformational boost to public transport usage, reversing the damage caused by the pandemic and bringing affordable fares to everyone in Scotland. This will provide an attractive and easy-to-use public transport system which has:

- Multimodal integration, such that multi-modal journeys can be made using one ticket.
- Standardised pricing, so that the cost of public transport is equal across Scotland and regional inconsistencies are eliminated.
- Local, regional and national ticketing offers, emulating the Austrian ‘1-2-3’ ticketing system (€1/day locally, €2/day regionally, €3/day nationwide).



**Affordability:** While the scheme is still under preparation, news reports suggest that the total cost of the Deutschlandticket will be around €3bn per annum, which, all other things being equal, on a per capita basis would amount to around £0.17bn (£170m) per annum in Scotland. This is a sizeable, but far from overwhelming, share of Transport Scotland’s £3.1bn annual budget; modest compared to the £1.6bn it spends annually on rail services; and a small fraction of the £7bn that the transport agency plans to spend on new traffic-generating roads schemes.

Any ticket of this type would be expected to generate significant additional levels of public transport use, generating new farebox income, and diminishing the annual cost of such schemes over time.

# BRITAIN'S RAILWAY

## - WHAT MATTERS TO PASSENGERS



*Transport Focus is the independent organisation, sponsored by the DfT, which monitors and researches the views of people who use UK transport.*

*In December TF published the results of a rail passenger survey it ran in partnership with Network Rail. To us the results are not in the least surprising. The rail industry decision makers already know these things too, but we need the politicians, who could increase rail's share of the transport budget, to take them on board and act on them.*

*Transport Focus said:*

**We partnered with Network Rail** on this work to help inform its investment plans for the next five-year Control Period.

We asked 15,226 passengers from around Great Britain to tell us what is important to them, and it highlights where investment and effort can best be targeted by the railway. The research also explores in more depth passengers' views on punctuality and reliability, engineering works, the environment and accessibility.

Key survey findings include:

- Almost three quarters of passengers believe it is more important for trains to run to schedule, compared with one in five who would prefer a quicker service which may increase the chance of delays.
- Less than half of passengers think the railway currently performs well on delivering value for money tickets.
- Passengers that last used the train more than 12 months ago say that cheaper fares are the factor most likely to encourage them to return to the train.
- Passengers say that the railway's ability to cope with adverse weather is the most important environmental issue. The railway's current performance in this area is a concern for some passengers, with more than one in four saying the railway performs poorly.
- Disabled passengers have the same top priorities of reliability and value for money, but unsurprisingly those travelling with a mobility scooter or wheelchair say it is accessibility that matters most to them.

The top issues that matter the most to passengers across Scotland are:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Price of train tickets offers value for money     | 7. Being kept informed about delays and the options passengers have |
| 2. Reliability and punctuality                       | 8. Inside of trains being clean and well-maintained                 |
| 3. Sufficiently frequent trains                      | 9. Their personal security at stations                              |
| 4. Getting a seat on the train                       | 10. Quick journey times   |
| 5. Accurate and timely information about train times |   |
| 6. Personal security on the train                    |   |

[www](#)

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*The companion web page for this issue contains links to two additional reports which focus on changing trains vs direct trains, and on printed timetables.*

# DELMORE TESTING



**This is the first work we've seen** on the ground for the new passing loop at Delmore on the edge of Inverness. Having campaigned for this loop for many years it is wonderful to see real evidence that it's on its way.



Telent, the contractor responsible for the RETB signalling system in use on the Far North and Kyle Lines, was busy in November testing the suitability of the current radio network for the new token exchange point\* here.

The RETB system uses a chain of base stations. There are two types of radio used, a Cell Radio talks to the train radios and a Link Radio talks to the adjacent base station (radio mast).

The new token exchange point requires a new base station and it was its planned location that was under test.

The work needed at Delmore also gives the opportunity to build more Radio Network Resilience into the RETB network. More will be required of the RETB system once the loop is installed as the points at each end will be motorised and radio controlled. An important decision made by the Far North Line Review Team was that the train operated points on the



Attaching the aerial to the crane

line, which have a speed restriction of 15 mph, would be replaced, allowing 45 mph entrance and exit to loops.

One lane of the A862 was occupied by Telent's equipment for the duration of the tests. The project involved setting up a temporary mast using an aerial attached to the jib of a crane, wired into a test vehicle. Once this was set up a Train Radio coverage test run was carried out between Inverness and Muir of Ord by one of the line's Class 158 trains, with radio signal testing equipment in the rear cab to measure the new proposed radio links to the adjacent base stations.

**Ian Budd**

\*all single line railways are divided into sections, each of which must only carry one train at a time. A unique 'token' exists for each section and it is held by the train occupying that section. Under RETB the token is electronic and is issued to the driver by radio at the token exchange point to allow it to proceed into the next section. It is relinquished at the end of the section and exchanged for the next section's token.



Test equipment in the cab of 158723 for the test run

## SCOTRAIL REGIONAL ROUNDTABLE

ScotRail has established a new format for disseminating information and gathering views. Regional Roundtable meetings will take place regularly around Scotland and offer the opportunity for key decision makers and local stakeholders to discuss issues pertaining to their area. The first Highlands & Islands Roundtable took place on 7 October in Inverness. FoFNL was well represented, as were the Highland Main Line Community Rail Partnership, the Friends of the West Highland Lines and the Scottish Association for Public Transport.

The rail operators were represented by Alex Hynes, Paul McKay, Scott Prentice and Joanne Maguire from ScotRail, and Matthew Spence from Network Rail.

Among the issues covered were post-Covid passenger numbers, electrification, rolling stock replacement and infrastructure plans. There were opportunities for those present to respond to the presentations and ask questions.

Unfortunately on this occasion the meeting time was curtailed, it is hoped that future meetings will not be subject to the same constraints.

This is a useful forum and provides an additional chance to share our views and concerns directly with ScotRail and Network Rail.

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In an interview Alex Hynes gave to the *Press & Journal* while in Inverness he mentioned that consideration will be given on whether to electrify the section of line between Inverness and Tain.

He also spoke about plans for Inverness Station, saying that "The idea is rather than do a cosmetic refurbishment, we do a proper masterplan so we can give Inverness a station to be proud of for the next 30 years"

# STPR2 FINAL REPORT

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**In December 2022 the final STPR2 report** was published. The draft report had appeared at the beginning of 2022 and a consultation process followed. In the expectation that consultation comments would have been taken on board and that the final report would show significant differences from the draft version, many happy hours were spent comparing the rail parts of the two documents side-by-side.

This proved to be a disappointing and largely fruitless exercise since the draft report's contents have mostly been replicated word for word.

It is possible to speculate about the significance of the few differences found. The Clyde Metro section has been completely rewritten and expanded, which suggests it's in planners' minds at the moment. The Aberdeen Rapid Transit section also has a little more detail.

The section about Highland Mainline Rail Corridor Enhancements has not changed and still "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."

For those in search of more specific and encouraging plans the *National Case for Change Report Appendix E: Options Sifted In for Further Consideration through STPR2*, published two years ago, has many references to the Far North Line including:

- Improve the journey time of the Far North Line through the provision of passing loops, improvements in line speed and signal enhancements
- Enhance the capacity of the Far North Line
- Upgrade of the Far North Line rail corridor, track dualling, platform extensions and improvements
- Improve the rail junction at Georgemas
- Construct Rail bridges over the Dornoch and Cromarty firths [mention of Cromarty Firth is presumably an error] on the Far North Line and direct trains to Inverness or even Inverness Airport
- Modernise the Far North and Kyle lines with more passing places e.g. Lentran, Kildary, Kinbrace, and Stromeferry. Provide all loops with motorised points to allow faster running. Speed up journey times with new hourly service frequency between Inverness and Invergordon
- Recasting of the Far North Line timetable to support tourism and day trips
- Far North Battery Locomotive Re-charge points – enablement of heavy freight to reach those parts of the network that will not be wired – preserves heavy freight capability (strategic requirement) to Far North / west coast locations for decarbonised freight (weight / distance)
- Route freight from Orkney and Shetland through Scrabster and onto the Far North Train Line
- Rail extension to connect the Far North Line to Scrabster Ferry terminal

And a detailed list of works needed on the line for freight:

- Minimum 2,896 mm high x 2,550 mm/2,600mm wide on FKA, IKA, IDA [Types of flat wagons for containers]
- RA8 Permissions [Route availability in terms of axle load and spacing]

- W9/W10/W12 with electrification [Loading gauge standards for structures on the line]
- Longer Loops, Length 640m
- Removal of RT3973 restrictions [Relating to exceptional loads]
- Journey Time Improvements/Better Paths
- Requirement for new or improved freight terminal facilities

In the introduction to "Initial appraisal: Case for Change - National - STPR2", from which the items above were extracted, it is stated that: "We're currently undertaking the second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2) to inform the Scottish Government's transport investment programme in Scotland over the next 20 years (2022 – 2042).

STPR2 takes a national overview of the transport network with a focus on regions and will help deliver the vision, priorities and outcomes that are set out in the new National Transport Strategy (NTS)."

We have no knowledge of the current status of the items listed above, except for the loading gauge alterations which are being co-ordinated with electrification work. FoFNL has a meeting with Network Rail in January where we will seek more information.

## STATION USAGE FIGURES

These are the annual figures from the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), published on 24 November 2022. The figures show the recovery up to 31 March 2022 when Covid lockdowns and travel advisories had only recently ended.

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	One Year Change	Two Year Change
Wick	16664	3442	12980	277.11%	-22.11%
Thurso	39702	6474	25200	289.25%	-36.53%
Georgemas Junction	1570	234	1032	341.03%	-34.27%
Scotsalder	232	18	116	544.44%	-50.00%
Altnabreac	232	46	230	400.00%	-0.86%
Forsinard	2866	160	660	312.50%	-76.97%
Kinbrace	456	44	370	740.91%	-18.86%
Kildonan	214	16	140	775.00%	-34.58%
Helmsdale	5086	564	3168	461.70%	-37.71%
Brora	6354	648	4722	628.70%	-25.68%
Dunrobin Castle	1240	114	770	575.44%	-37.90%
Golspie	5586	576	4536	687.50%	-18.80%
Rogart	1656	150	992	561.33%	-40.10%
Lairg	6264	742	2960	298.92%	-52.75%
Invershin	216	50	210	320.00%	-2.78%
Culrain	312	42	164	290.48%	-47.44%
Ardgay	6408	624	3968	535.90%	-38.08%
Tain	28036	3522	19664	458.32%	-29.86%
Fearn	4182	850	2980	250.59%	-28.74%
Invergordon	27826	3134	13308	324.63%	-52.17%
Alness	27050	3220	15810	390.99%	-41.55%
Dingwall	80154	9864	46524	371.65%	-41.96%
Conon Bridge	18022	2598	9212	254.58%	-48.88%
Muir Of Ord	70850	13556	41230	204.15%	-41.81%
Beauly	46510	14918	30178	102.29%	-35.12%
Inverness	1214648	231894	753228	224.82%	-37.99%
Total (excluding Inverness)	397688	65606	241124	267.53%	-39.37%

# STEWART NICOL

**FoFNL was sad to learn** that Stewart Nicol, Chief Executive of Inverness Chamber of Commerce, is leaving that post in May next year.

Stewart has been a very vocal advocate of the need for Inverness and the Highlands to have the best possible transport links to the rest of the country. He has not tired of pointing out that the railway provision radiating from Inverness is not fit for purpose.

We very much hope that his successor is as dedicated to persuading the Scottish Government to improve this situation as he has been.

Stewart's most recent article in the *Inverness Courier*, welcoming the imminent opening of Inverness Airport Station, highlights the current deficiencies and emphasises how different transport provision is in more enlightened European countries.



## **Stewart Nicol** - *Inverness Courier* 06-12-22

**I'm really looking forward** to the opening of our new railway station at Inverness Airport later this month, as it's a great way to round off a challenging year. It is a long overdue addition to our local rail infrastructure and will become a key part of the transport infrastructure for both the City of Inverness and the wider Highland region. It will undoubtedly give users of the airport another travel option in terms of connectivity to Inverness, Nairn and Moray. Importantly though, I believe it also has great potential to provide a convenient commuter option for the growing communities to the east of Inverness, including the impressive development of Tornagrain.

Unquestionably, the key to the success of the station will be the service timetable and how well that integrates with the flight schedules. I have the suspicion there may well be a bedding-in period around all of this before we get to our final desired destination?

While this is a really positive development, it is at best modest and highlights for me how much

needs to be done with the rest of the rail infrastructure of the Highlands. The Highland Main Line, our rail connection between Inverness and Perth, is for the avoidance of doubt not remotely close to being a 'Main Line' by any definition. Indeed, I often reflect, it would look remarkably familiar to our Victorian forefathers who originally built it! As colleagues in Caithness regularly remind me on these matters, the fact it takes around 4½ hours to travel the 100 or so miles to Wick by train demonstrates just how unfit-for-purpose the Far North Line also is in terms of meeting the needs of their businesses and communities.

Over recent weeks I have seen a number of business social media discussions around the high standard and impressive performance of rail travel across mainland Europe, which is something I first experienced on a business trip to Sweden over two decades ago. Before we start to discuss standards and performance of our rail services, we again enter a new year with no prospect of seeing any meaningful improvement to our region's basic rail infrastructure.

Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd (HIAL) is currently considering the options for improving the airport terminal. FoFNL very much hopes that they realise the need, in the light of the modal shift to rail that is the Scottish Government's policy, to make transfer between train and aeroplane as seamless and convenient as possible. London City Airport is a great exemplar of what can be done.

The most expensive, but by far the most desirable and least disruptive option being considered, is to build a new terminal beside the station. It is to be hoped that HIAL will not consider the potential loss of profits from airport parking as travellers shift from road to rail to be a factor, but will choose the option that's best for passengers.

# NEW ROLLING STOCK

## FOFNL'S VIEW

[www](#)

As Scotland's Railway gears up for decarbonisation by 2035 procurement of new trains on the rural/scenic routes is imminent. FoFNL is determined that this opportunity is used to furnish the lines with comfortable, attractive trains, which will encourage travellers to use rail instead of driving. We have set out what we regard as the essential requirements for new rolling stock in a document containing a page of bullet points, followed by references to the industry's own guidelines, as described in Rail Delivery Group's *Key Train Requirements v6*.

See this issue's companion web page for the full document and a link to a video walk-through of a Greater Anglia Class 755.



### New Trains for Rural/Scenic Routes

Many features of current rolling stock are standard and do not need to be listed here. This is a list of features we regard as essential to attract passengers to use Scotland's long rural/tourist routes. The journeys taken on these trains often take as long as those on intercity routes, so comfort needs to be equivalent. Uncomfortable, noisy trains may prevent modal shift and the railway also needs to be aware of the standards offered on competing bus services.

For an excellent example of what can be done, see the Stadler Class 755 currently in use on Great Anglia rural lines.

- Comfortable seats lined up with windows. No seats without a window. Invite passenger testing of proposed seats by actual users of the lines.
- Windows as large and tall as possible. Being able to view the spectacular scenery from all seats is essential on these routes which attract tourist traffic.
- An even mix of 'airline seats' and tables.
- More leg-room than is found on suburban trains.
- Ride quality as good as Mk 3 carriages. Comfort is essential to persuade travellers

to use the train instead of their cars.

- Quiet air conditioning.
- Ingress of cold air during station stops in cold weather should be mitigated by warm air control.
- Good sound insulation, especially beneath the floor.
- We endorse the recommendations in section 3.21 of KTR v6, "Lighting levels are to be sufficient to facilitate typical passenger activities such as reading, whilst not being so bright as to become intrusive", and "Passengers welcome the ability to influence the lighting levels of their immediate environment."
- Catering: Trolley service is sometimes found wanting where hot water and supplies run out in long journeys and/or during long delays - base facilities on trains which are only to be used on these lines would provide a more reliable service.
- At least two toilets per train.
- Wheelchair and cycle provision tailored to the expected needs of passengers on these routes.
- Platform heights vary widely so an access solution for wheelchair users which doesn't involve assistance is needed.

*The photos show a bi-mode four-car Greater Anglia Stadler FLIRT Class 755 unit at Thetford, and the interior of one of the units, featuring the large, tall windows. Photos: Superalbs [CC BY-SA 4.0]*



Alstom's iLint on arrival at München Hbf  
Photo: Alstom

# TRACTION SELECTION

[www](http://www.railrevolution.net)

**On 15 September** one of the Alstom Coradia iLint hydrogen powered units from Weser-Elbe-Netz regional passenger services performed a range demonstration run from Bremervörde to Munich. The train covered 1175 km (730 miles) without refuelling. The journey took around 19 hours with some stops, an average speed of 38 mph. It's a reasonable assumption that the train was lightly loaded, and the speed kept down, in order to achieve the 1000 km target. The units have a stated range of 600-800 kms.

The decision on whether to opt for HMUs, BMUs or BEMUs (Hydrogen, Battery or Battery Electric Multiple Units) on the 'rural lines' in Scotland which may never be fully electrified, has yet to be made.

The debate has been going on for quite a while and there is no escape from basic physics. HMUs have to carry batteries, albeit probably smaller and therefore lighter than those in BMUs and BEMUs. Any trains which cover non-electrified sections of route therefore use some of their power to transport their own supply. This is obviously true for diesel traction too.

Logic would suggest that the most economical and resource-efficient long term solution for rail traction without CO<sub>2</sub> emissions must be

overhead electrification. The energy efficiency of BMUs is a distant second-best and of HMUs a pretty remote third. However, to meet the Scottish Government's Decarbonisation Plan interim/permanent rolling stock solutions have to be found.

For a (2018, and therefore somewhat dated) breakdown of the practical differences between these solutions [www.railvolution.net/news/fuel-cell-coradia-ilint-on-test](http://www.railvolution.net/news/fuel-cell-coradia-ilint-on-test) is worth a read.

Of course in the decision-making processes many factors are in play and it is interesting to read some of the differing views quoted in the railway press.

In *Rail Engineer* magazine its editor, David Shirres, makes strong arguments about seeing the decision between hydrogen and battery power for trains in the broad context of hydrogen's future role in Scotland:

*"Scotland's Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan details how rail passenger services will be decarbonised by 2035. By then, the aim is for all core routes to be electrified with services on the remaining less-intensively used routes powered by either battery or hydrogen powered traction.*

*For some, Hydrogen trains are an unnecessary*

*distraction. They are considered to be inefficient and more expensive to operate than battery trains and require complex novel fuelling arrangements.*

*Such views, however, do not take account of the need to develop a hydrogen economy which will be required if the necessary transition from fossil fuels is to be achieved. In issue 193 (Nov-Dec 2021), Rail Engineer reported on the COP26 hydrogen transition summit. This explained why hydrogen is essential for a low carbon economy as it is the only way to decarbonise things that cannot be directly electrified such as ships, steel production, and heavy mobility. In addition, it can provide grid balancing for renewable power.*

*The Scottish Government's Hydrogen Action Plan aims to produce 800,000 tonnes of hydrogen per annum by 2030. This equates to 27 TWh or 17% of Scotland's current energy demand. The plan considers that, by 2045, a strong hydrogen sector in Scotland could support up to 300,000 jobs, many of which could use the skills of those displaced from the oil and gas industries. As part of this plan, £100 million has been committed to develop the hydrogen economy over the next five years."*

Meanwhile, in *Modern Railways* magazine, interviews with Alex Hynes (Managing Director, Scotland's Railway) and Bill Reeve (Director of Rail, Transport Scotland) shed some light on current thinking:

AH: *"The current operating costs of hydrogen trains are much higher than for diesel. Most of our rural routes use two-car diesels. In the UK gauge it's likely you'd need space in the train to store the hydrogen, so you might have to buy a three-car hydrogen train to replace a two-car diesel and keep the same capacity. That could create all manner of issues with depots, lengths of loops, sidings and so on. That's why we have a bias to continuous electrification in Scotland."*

BR: *"Hydrogen trains take longer to fuel, you can't put as much fuel in and you can't put fuel in the same place as passengers. That's why we're working with our partners to understand the practicalities. I don't see a future where hydrogen trains come close to the operating cost of diesel trains, let alone electrics."*

Encouragingly, from the FNL viewpoint where possible electrification to Tain is already in the decarbonisation plan, Bill goes on to talk about the West Highland Line, *"If you could double the number of passengers\* and do the electrification for £1 million per stk (single track kilometre), you could have a case. The West Highland Line is closer to covering its costs than many routes in Scotland and it's not actually that long. It's likely we'll end up with battery-electric or fuel cell trains, but we don't know for sure yet."*

Modern Railways' highly-respected columnist, Roger Ford, has this to say on the subject:

*"Hydrogen fuel cell power has been the poster child for alternative traction, promoted heavily by Alstom and Siemens. Hydrogen trains are effectively fuel cell-battery hybrids. In the case of the Alstom iLint, the battery provides power for the traction equipment while the fuel cell charges the battery and powers the train when running at constant speed.*

*My critical approach to the rapidly inflating hydrogen traction bubble was not because there was no place for hydrogen traction in future. Rather, that this place was a very small niche and that, despite this, hydrogen was being promoted as an alternative to electrification, as opposed to decarbonising the lightly used fringes towards the end of a rolling programme. In any case, until green hydrogen from renewable sources was available in quantity, fuel cells show little or no advantage in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions over a diesel-battery hybrid.*

*All this before you consider the cost of the trains, the cost of the hydrogen and the cost of the infrastructure. This is reflected in a study commissioned for the German state of Baden-Württemberg into the economics of future traction for currently diesel hauled rural routes.*

*This study concluded that in terms of total cost of ownership over 30 years, hydrogen fuel cell traction came a poor third after battery hybrids and electrification."*

This is a fascinating discussion and decision deadlines for rolling stock procurement are fast approaching - the pressure is on!

**Ian Budd**

\*It is Scottish Government policy to achieve a 20% reduction in car miles - this would result in a doubling of rail passengers. [www.raileng.co.uk](http://www.raileng.co.uk)

# VIVARAIL



**Vivarail**, the company which produces diesel and/or battery-powered multiple-units using old London Underground stock, went into administration on 1 December.

Managing Director Steve McBride wrote, "It feels like we have performed miracles at times but pedestrian market conditions and a serious helping of mickey taking from one industry player has dealt a severe blow. The task now is to look after our people and find a like-minded partner to salvage the best of what we have achieved."

The joint administrators, Grant Thornton UK, said the "Increasingly difficult operating environment and delays to the anticipated upscaling of key net-zero projects and pilots" had contributed to a funding shortfall "that has not been capable of resolution in the timescales available."

HITRANS 'RAIL ROUND UP' FROM THE REPORT TO THE PARTNERSHIP MEETING ON 6 OCTOBER 2022.



## Evanton Station

We have engaged consultants Aecom to investigate the technical feasibility of reopening Evanton Station, with funding from the Coastal Communities Fund, HITRANS and Kiltlearn Community Council. There have been delays in accessing the future timetable data. A presentation to Kiltlearn Community Council is scheduled for Monday 7 September [2022].

## Zero Emissions Train

The former Class 314 electric train has now successfully run on hydrogen at the Bo'ness heritage railway. The train has been retro fitted with a fuel cell and hydrogen tanks, with green hydrogen supplied by Angel Trains electrolyser. Wick-Thurso remains the proposed test route for mainline testing, a Programme for Government commitment for 2025.

## Going With The Flow

The plan to recommence timber from the Flow Country to Inverness by rail has been stalled as wagons are not currently available. It had been hoped to run a demonstrator project, building on the success of the Georgemas trial of 2020. Planning permission for a lineside loading pad has been awarded. Discussions are ongoing on routes to wagon procurement. The economics of timber by rail will be much improved if West Fraser at Morayhill decide to create a rail terminal taking advantage of the signalling alterations at the new Inverness Airport station.

## Inverness Airport Station

The new station will be open for the start of the December 22 timetable. HITRANS work on this has been ongoing since 2005. The station will cater for airport users, airport workers, business park visitors and workers, and residents of Tornagrain and wider East Inverness.

## Fair Exchange

The new signalling token exchange point at Stromeferry on the Kyle Line 30% funded by HITRANS is now operational. It breaks up the long 40-minute section between Strathcarron and Kyle, providing additional capacity for engineering access to the track, improved operations at Kyle through permissive working, and efficient road traffic management during periods of rockface maintenance on the A890.

## CONON BRIDGE STATION TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF REOPENING

**Conon Bridge Station reopened** on 8 February 2013 after a campaign by HITRANS and FoFNL. It is on the site of the original station which closed in 1960 and consists of a short platform of around 15 metres, nearly identical in length to the one at nearby Beaully which reopened in 2002.

The original station had two platforms and would have been the junction for the partially constructed Cromarty and Dingwall Light Railway which never opened due to the onset of WWI.

The £600,000 station was delivered on time and within budget and took only five months from the announcement of the project to the opening. It was financed by Transport Scotland, HITRANS and The Highland Council. In Network Rail's press release on the opening day, David Simpson, then Managing Director of Network Rail Scotland, said, "The delivery of the new station on-time, within budget and to such a tight timescale shows what can be achieved when organisations work together to deliver for passengers."

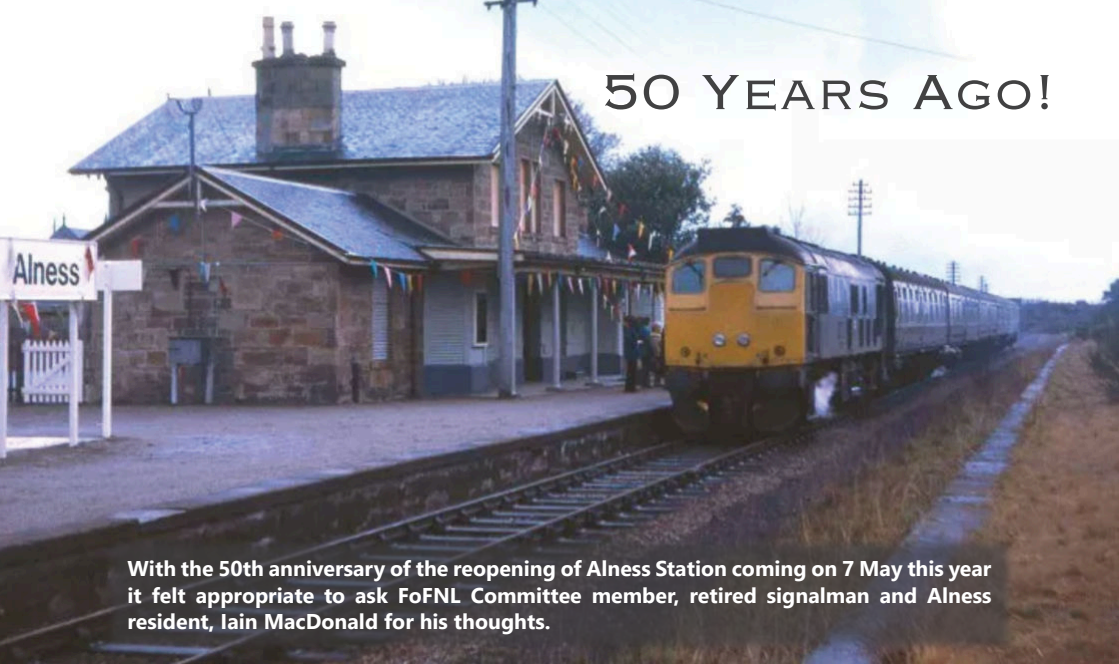
The station has had an average annual usage in the seven full years up to the start of the Covid pandemic of 16,435.

As Steve Montgomery, then Managing Director of First ScotRail said at the time, "Having a station will make a big difference for local people and visitors alike, by providing a real alternative to the car. The more we can encourage people to travel by train the better it is for the environment."



From left: Steve Montgomery, Cllr Margaret Paterson, Keith Brown MSP, Cllrs Angela MacLean and Alister Mackinnon, and David Simpson (NR).  
Photo: John Yellowlees

# 50 YEARS AGO!



**With the 50th anniversary of the reopening of Alness Station coming on 7 May this year it felt appropriate to ask FoFNL Committee member, retired signalman and Alness resident, Iain MacDonald for his thoughts.**

**I often performed relief duties at Alness** for staff holidays, sickness or other reasons prior to it being closed on 13 June 1960. I strongly disagreed with it being closed as I considered it to be busier than Invergordon, which I didn't want to see closed either. It's good that is now 50 years since its reopening.

I well remember the original station building which was in much the same style as Kildary and Fearn, it also had a private waiting room which I think was for the Lea & Perrins people who had interests in the area.

Unfortunately after closure the building lying empty was vandalised and lead was stolen from the roof. It got into such disrepair that it was eventually demolished.

Prior to closure this was indeed a busy station, handling traffic for two distilleries, one (Dalmore) connected by a siding from the station and the other (Teaninich) served by road. Older locals and others will remember the three wheeled maroon and cream Scammell artic lorries of that time. It was common practice for these to deliver/collect at the time of day the distillery workers were given a dram - no one minded us joining in! A jam jar was the usual vessel for dispensing the beverage, not full but enough to put a glow on your cheeks.



During winter months one of the more onerous jobs was preparing and lighting Tilley lamps. The office and the waiting room had them, as did the two platforms which had three each. The lamps were of a circular design pressurised by a bicycle pump and wound up a pole about 15 foot high. If the pressure dropped, or they ran short of paraffin, they had to be lowered and attended to. There were also two storm type Tilley lamps on each corner of the bridge. Looking after these, together with fires to attend to in the station building, as well as signalling and clerical duties, was quite a big workload.

Alness was also an RAF base and when servicemen were going on furlough it wasn't uncommon for them to want to deviate from the route on their warrant, so we had to work out the different mileage and then charge five sevenths of the extra fare - with a queue of them it wasn't easy!

Another of our jobs was operating the weigh-bridge, there were lorries continually coming in to be weighed,

After the station reopened it was managed by staff from Invergordon with a Portacabin in place, by which time I'd moved to RETB signalling in Inverness. I think that remained until it became an unstaffed halt.

Anyway I have some happy memories of the old Alness Station.

Iain MacDonald

**Photos:** [Top] A Class 24 brings an Inverness-bound train into Alness Station on the first day of service in May 1973

Photo: David Spaven

[Inset] British Railways Scammell Scarab: London 1962 Photo: Don O'Brien, licensed under CC BY 2.0

Iain mentioned Lea & Perrins having a private waiting room. The story behind this is somewhat surprising: Charles William Dyson Perrins was the grandson of William Perrins, the co-originator of the recipe of the famous Lea & Perrins Worcestershire sauce. He inherited the business on the death of his father and in 1898 purchased Ardress Castle, near to Alness, as a summer retreat for his family. Dyson Perrins soon became a major benefactor to the town, in 1903 providing the Ardress - Alness Club (now called the Perrins Centre), which included a library, reading rooms and a billiard room. He also gave the town a bowling club and a golf club. In return for his generosity he was given a private waiting room at the station.



In her recent book, *Lairds in Waiting*, Anne-Mary Paterson paints a picture of the Perrin family's railway travels:

“Each year the family spent several summer months at Ardress Castle. The railway ran close to Davenham, their family home in Malvern, where there was a private siding into the property grounds. When the family went off to Ardress Castle, they hired a whole train, loaded it up in their siding with everything needed for their long holiday and together with their guests and servants, set off for Alness. Presumably the same thing happened in the opposite direction.”

Ian Budd

## LAIRDS IN WAITING

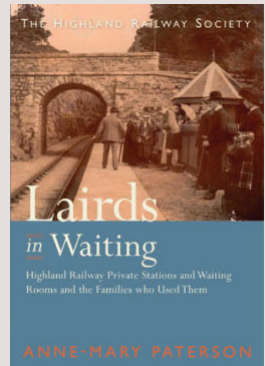
Anne-Mary Paterson, Highland Railway Society, 2021

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

ISBN: 9780 992731 14 4 Paperback: 88pp. £9.90

**Well known writer** on railway subjects and FoFNL member, Anne-Mary Paterson has written a railway book with a unique angle which makes a fascinating and entertaining read. Anne-Mary's family background of civil engineering shines through as she takes you on a tour of Highland stations with private waiting rooms for the use of the local landowners who had a special, even symbiotic, relationship with the railway.

Ten stations are covered in detail, including four on the Far North Line. This is far more than just a 'railway book', you will get an insight into the history surrounding the stations and the activities of the Lairds who are featured. The coming of the railway to the Highlands changed life for ever and many of the landowners were quick to recognise the opportunities afforded by this new quick and safe transport. Reading the book is like being given a guided tour by a knowledgeable friend, since Anne-Mary often writes in the first person. She has lived in Beaulieu, (whose station once hosted Lord Lovat's private waiting room) for many years, so is an ideal guide.



Ian Budd

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# TIMBER TRANSPORT

## WE MUST END THE LOG JAM

In our February 2022 issue of *Far North Express* we reported, with some excitement, on The Highland Council's enlightened decision to back the planners of modal shift of freight to rail, such as Frank Roach of HITRANS, by giving planning permission to the project to facilitate lineside loading of timber to dedicated trains at Altnabreac.

A year on and there is an air of frustration and disappointment. So far attempts to procure dedicated rail vehicles have failed and there is no sign yet of the rail link into West Fraser's (formerly Norbord's) factory being built. The design for the installation of double track and signalling through the new Inverness Airport Station includes provision for this.

HITRANS Partnership Board Meeting 06-10-22

### *Going With The Flow*

The plan to recommence timber from the Flow Country to Inverness by rail has been stalled as wagons are not currently available. It had been hoped to run a demonstrator project, building on the success of the Georgemas trial of 2020. Planning permission for a lineside loading pad has been awarded. Discussions are ongoing on routes to wagon procurement. The economics of timber by rail will be much improved if West Fraser at Morayhill decides to create a rail terminal taking advantage of the signalling alterations at the new Inverness Airport station.

It is however very heartening to see that West Fraser has this statement on its website:

"At the moment, virtually all of the OSB (Oriented Strand Board, used in the construction industry) manufactured in the Inverness plant goes out by road, but right now we are in a capital process with Network Rail. We've run trials and are in the process of building the capital infrastructure to be able to switch to rail

and that will have a massive impact on transport emissions. By switching from road to rail we estimate that we will make a saving of around 9,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> a year."

To stakeholders such as ourselves, and other onlookers, the process of working towards a more sustainable, and less damaging transport system, seems somewhat haphazard. It can appear that there are two parallel universes in existence in Scotland. On the one hand we have the Scottish Government's policy of modal shift, designed to reduce the causes of global warming, which is embodied in Transport Scotland's Rail Directorate and its specific programme to eliminate diesel passenger rail vehicles and to electrify as much of the network as possible. And on the other there is the Scottish Government's plan to spend large sums on road projects instead, which are ostensibly about improving safety, but will inevitably also encourage more road use rather than less.

At the end of October the Inverness, Highlands, and Islands edition of the *Press & Journal* carried a substantial article by Paul Boobyer, project manager for the Timber Transport Forum. The article only covered road vehicles and the second paragraph stated, "The current annual timber harvest from Scottish land is around seven million tonnes, which will need to be transported by netzero vehicles within the next 13 years."

The article went on to cover Transport Scotland's Zero Emission Truck Taskforce and spoke in detail about what is required to remove diesel power from the timber transport industry. This would have been a wonderful opportunity to discuss all the options for transporting timber and the fact that rail provides a way of greatly reducing the need for so many individual vehicles. If the greatest proportion of timber's journey could be accomplished by rail, far fewer such vehicles would need to be built, thereby making valuable savings on materials and manufacturing processes, not to mention the savings on the power needed to shift a fleet of

lorries, compared with long trains.

Although the article in the *P&J* missed the chance to mention rail, a search through the Timber Transport Forum website did produce some reassuring quotes:

"What do we want to achieve? - Minimise the impact of timber transport on the public road network - Moving timber by other modes of transport where possible." And this from the Highland Timber Transport Group (THC area) section of the site:

"Explore and promote the potential for increased use of rail transport, including the development of additional rail terminals."

These aspirations need to be followed through as a matter of urgency; it would be of great benefit if the road and rail arms of Transport Scotland would continuously work together to find ways of transferring traffic to rail, perhaps they do, but for the Roads Directorate to shift its

emphasis from large building projects to maintenance and to reducing the need for road investment may feel counterintuitive, especially when faced with a strong roads lobby.

Doubtless there will be losers in the process of modal shift, and the road haulage industry understandably tries to protect its interests. However, this is where government comes in - it is its job to ensure that the best transport methods are used for the public good. This obviously requires making it as easy as possible for businesses to decide to shift to rail transport where possible.

The printing of the article in the *P&J* prompted the penning of a letter which the paper printed on 3 November.

A link to the original article is on the companion web page to this issue.

[www](#)

**Ian Budd**

Sir, – Your article, *Tough road ahead in bid to decarbonise timber lorries* (October 29), reveals a dangerous focus in the minds of planners on the permanent use of road vehicles to transport timber in Scotland.

Nowhere in the article is there any mention of rail, yet this is the obvious way to transport huge quantities of heavy timber.

Of course the timber needs to be transported to the nearest railhead, but the number of vehicles needed to do this would be far fewer than the number currently used to move multiple individual loads on our road system.

Clearly it is necessary to replace diesel lorries with battery or hydrogen powered vehicles. However the expense in terms of carbon emissions during lorry construction, and use of scarce minerals in the power units, should dictate that the most economical and environmentally friendly method of transport should be chosen, keeping the number of separate road vehicles to the absolute minimum.

An example of an ideal system is the planned loading facility at Altnabreac (in Caithness). Self-powered vehicles will be needed to move the timber to the loading point on the railway. Once it is there it will be able to make its journey by rail direct to the West Fraser factory near the new Inverness Airport Station (once the company installs the rail connection which has been designed into the adjacent track formation).

This is not only a question of making the best use of limited resources while keeping carbon emissions at a minimum, it is also a safety and environmental matter for our roads. HGVs loaded with timber damage the road surfaces and can make driving unpleasant for other users.

A single timber train replaces dozens of HGVs.

It is to be hoped that the Roads Directorate and Rail Directorate of Transport Scotland are working hand-in-glove to achieve the necessary outcome, which may well involve some financial incentives and assistance to ensure this.

**Ian Budd, Convener, Friends of the Far North Line.**

# PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

**Question S6W-11363: Fiona Hyslop**, Linlithgow, Scottish National Party, answered on 5 October 2022

*To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its Franchise Agreement with Serco Caledonian Sleepers Limited.*

**Jenny Gilruth:** I can confirm that today Serco Caledonian Sleepers Limited has been advised that its proposal to rebase the Franchise Agreement with Scottish Ministers for the provision of Caledonian Sleeper rail services has been rejected on the grounds of not representing value for money to the public.

Additionally, I can confirm that a notice was served today which confirms that the Scottish Ministers will terminate the Franchise Agreement with Serco Caledonian Sleepers Limited on 25 June 2023.

Work is underway to determine arrangements for the continued provision of Caledonian Sleeper rail services beyond 25 June 2023 and this will be updated to Parliament once determined.

It is worth noting that Serco Caledonian Sleepers Limited has, broadly, delivered well and significantly improved Caledonian Sleeper services over the last 7 years.

**Question S6W-10663: Pauline McNeill**, Glasgow, Scottish Labour, answered on 5 October 2022

*To ask the Scottish Government whether there are any plans to implement tactile paving in all train stations to help disabled passengers to travel safely using trains.*

**Jenny Gilruth:** I can confirm that, Network Rail Scotland, has developed a plan for installing platform edge tactile paving at all Scottish stations by the end of the current Rail Regulatory Control Period 6 (end of March 2024). The work is being completed over two phases. Phase 1 installed tactile paving at 18 high priority stations by the end of March 2022, phase 2 will address the remaining 148 stations.

**Question S6W-11821: Monica Lennon**, Central Scotland, Scottish Labour, answered on 11 November 2022

*To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to support local authorities to establish their own bus services, so that any locally-owned companies can provide integrated and improved services, which may lead to a reduction in fares for passengers.*

**Jenny Gilruth:** The new powers provided by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 enable local authorities to determine what is best for their own areas. I recognise that not every authority will want to run their own bus services, some may opt for a partnership or franchise approach. It is important that the options within the Act are fully explored to ensure they are appropriate for the area and are sustainable for local authorities' long term. Work is currently ongoing with local authorities and COSLA to determine how best to allocate funding in light of the emergency budget review.

As you know, we are also undertaking a Fair Fares Review to ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares as we recover from the pandemic. As part of the

Review, we are considering both the availability of services and the range of discounts and concessionary schemes, which are available on all modes including bus, rail and ferry. We will also consider options that maintain and increase affordability for those who need it most, taking cognisance of the relative changes to the overall cost of travel.

**Question S6W-12066: Graham Simpson**, Central Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 22 November 2022

*To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S6W-11710 by Jenny Gilruth on 8 November 2022, what actions and processes ScotRail has put in place to improve its arrangements for passengers requiring travel assistance.*

**Jenny Gilruth:** ScotRail and Network Rail teams have reinforced to staff the importance of passenger assistance adhering to the correct procedures when a passenger is being assisted onto or off a train.

In the event there is no ticket examiner on board the train to deploy the ramp, the station staff will alert the Customer Service Centre and alternative arrangements can be made. At unstaffed stations, customers are advised to make contact with the Customer Service Centre team via the platform Help Point.

If customers are unable to book assistance in advance, they can turn up and request assistance from ScotRail's on-train staff. Both the station and on-train staff are trained to look out for customers who appear to need help on platforms before the train leaves the station. If customers are travelling from an unstaffed station, they can speak to a member of staff via the station Help Point. Managers have been asked to ensure they monitor these procedures.

**Question S6W-12113: Jamie Greene**, West Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 22 November 2022

*To ask the Scottish Government on what specific date it will make an announcement regarding the continued provision of Caledonian Sleeper rail services beyond 25 June 2023.*

**Jenny Gilruth:** In accordance with the requirements of the Railways Act 1993 and the Scottish Ministers' Franchising Policy Statement, consideration is being given to the successor arrangement for the continued provision of Caledonian Sleeper services.

The Scottish Ministers have to work within the relevant current legislation, principally the Railways Act 1993, which neither they nor the Scottish Parliament have powers to change.

**Question S6W-12057: Richard Leonard**, Central Scotland, Scottish Labour, answered on 24 November 2022

*To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S6W-07663 by Jenny Gilruth on 27 April 2022, whether it will publish the programme of activities for the National Rail Conversation.*

**Jenny Gilruth:** After initial planning work with transport partners and stakeholder, Transport Scotland officials are engaged in finalising the programme for the National Rail Conversation, including the first significant public phase, of external stakeholder engagement. This will see key stakeholders, including rail staff representatives, invited to a number of events in the New Year. These sessions will enable those taking part to offer their views on the National Rail Conversation. Further details of the programme will be provided at these even and announced in due course.

# SOMEWHERE, UNDER THE RAINBOW!



Not just 'somewhere' but one of many beautiful stretches on the Far North Line. From just south of Helmsdale until a couple of miles north of Brora the line is close to the sea. Here, beside the village of Portgower, the line closely follows the coast, affording wonderful views of the North Sea and across to distant Moray.

This photo was taken on 6 June 1999 and the photographer, **Peter Robinson**, sent it to me after I had contacted him to obtain permission to use his photos of the *Caithness Entrepreneur* which featured in September's issue of *Far North Express*, "Jim Welsh Remembered".

Peter wrote, "I have attached for your interest another Far North Line picture taken during the foot and mouth epidemic in 1999. The local landowner very kindly allowed me to go on his land. It's one of the very early runs of an up-market charter passing Portgower, having been to Thurso."

As soon as I saw this stunning photo I knew it would need a page to itself!

**Ian Budd**

# CASTLE FINDS NEW OWNER



**Carbisdale Castle**, which for many years was a very spectacular youth hostel, and provided significant traffic for nearby Culrain Station, has finally found an enthusiastic new owner.

Samantha Kane, an international barrister, originally from Iraq, bought the castle on impulse in the summer of 2022 for £1.2m, having had no previous connection with the area. She intends to spend around £10m in the next two years refurbishing the castle as a private residence. She also plans to open part of the castle to the public. Ms Kane issued this Press Statement:

“Samantha intends to invest in the local economy through the creation of jobs, both in the castle itself and in its surrounding estate, as well as through the involvement of Highland-based contractors during the renovation process itself.

“Her commitment to the economic health of the local area will also be reflected in a range of initiatives, such as support for local organic farmers, a cause close to her heart.

“As an ardent supporter of wildlife conversation,

Samantha has also pledged to engage with local charitable causes, which will align with her commitment to preserving the extensive forested estate surrounding the castle.”

Carbisdale Castle was the last Scottish castle to be built, dating from 1907. We hope the new owner gets on well with Betty, the ghost, a familiar figure during the castle’s time as a youth hostel.

FoFNL also hopes that Ms Kane will encourage her visitors to arrive by train - she might even be tempted to purchase a private waiting room - if such a thing is possible these days! Perhaps Culrain will recover some of the footfall it lost when the castle closed as a youth hostel.

There is Listed Building Consent for 19 bedrooms, 5 reception rooms and a self-contained flat and it cost about the same as a small flat in London! The purchase is a welcome boost for the area and by October renovation work had already commenced. There has even been the appointment of an official piper for the castle!

**Ian Budd**

# GREEN ROOFS

**The long-running saga** of the missing passenger shelter roof at Muir of Ord Station prompts reflection on the projects being adopted in various UK cities, including Leicester, Sheffield and London, to install 'Green Roofs' on bus shelters. In built-up areas every little bit of extra greenery helps to maintain the vital bee population, as well as cooling the air in the shelter beneath and filtering out pollutants. The shelters have a Polyfelt blanket, overlain with 30-40mm sedum\* vegetation mats. Utrecht in the Netherlands pioneered using the unused space on top of bus shelters for added biodiversity. By 2019 they had over 300 bus shelters featuring green roofs. [Below]

Network Rail has a large number of these shelters and it would be a useful and pleasing project to have them replaced with green-roofed structures.

The roof on the shelter at Muir of Ord was blown off in February 2022 and currently passengers have a fine view of the (sometimes) blue sky if they look up. The good news is that at the end of November Network Rail had quotes in for the work to replace the shelter so by the time this is published it should have been done.

\*Sedum is a large genus of flowering plants with water storing leaves in the family *Crassulaceae*, members of which are commonly known as stonecrops.



Waiting at Muir of Ord

Photo: Neil Wallace



# NETWORK RAIL ECOLOGY FOCUS

*As a very significant owner and custodian of land running the length of the rail system, Network Rail is responsible for balancing the needs of rail safety and ecological preservation.*

NR Press Release - 1 December 2022

**Network Rail has successfully completed** work to clear trees and vegetation on an 8-mile stretch of railway between Evanton and Invergordon.

The work was needed to keep passengers safe and trains punctual and to reduce the risk for lineside neighbours.

Working from August until November, the team cleared trees and vegetation to create a safe and maintainable rail corridor which will help to reduce delays and improve performance on services through the area.



**Tree Planting**

To protect the local ecology and to compensate for the removal of trees, 16 bat and 16 bird boxes were installed and leftover small branches were used to create habitat piles to support invertebrates and insects and to improve the overall diversity of the line. A pine-marten den was also created.

As it was not practical to replant lineside at the location where the vegetation was removed, more than 400 trees and shrubs compatible with the railway environment were planted at near-by Bunchrew.

To protect and assist the tree planting, biodegradable tree shelters and mulch mats have been used instead of plastic, as a more environmentally friendly option to protect the saplings.

Kirsty Armstrong, Network Rail's project manager for the vegetation clearance work said,

"While our priority is the safety and performance of the railway, this project has been planned and delivered in a way that is really positive for the railway and demonstrates how we can manage the lineside environment to protect wildlife and promote biodiversity.

"We have taken a number of proactive steps to off-set the impact of removing trees and created a mixture of habitats to support the many and varied species that live alongside the railway. It sets the standard for sustainable management of the lineside environment for the future.

"We want to thank the local community for their understanding while we delivered the project."



**Habitat Pile**

# PLEASE, STOP THE DIGITAL WORLD, I WANT TO GET OFF

By Rosemary Goring

*Here's a piece from The Herald last October. We suspect that many of our readers will relate to this and we beg those in the rail industry who receive copies of Far North Express to take note. It's far too easy for the accountants to be dazzled by the wonderful savings that can be made on staffing and office space and to forget the dreadful PR of forcing travellers to fit in to the digital systems which don't always work and with which many are far from comfortable.*

**Downloading boarding passes recently** for a flight, I found myself in a quandary. When booking our tickets we had paid for a couple of suitcases to go into the hold. Now, however, there was no way to check in without paying for additional bags. Aborting the exercise and starting from scratch, in case I had overlooked an obvious step, made no difference. In the end, the options were to abandon the holiday, or pay extra. Which, of course, is what I did. As a result, instead of reserving enough space for a short jaunt, we had the capacity, if we so wished, to pack for a round-the-world trip.

When, I wondered, did it become impossible to navigate an airline website without being obliged to take out your wallet at every turn? When, indeed, did going away become fraught with hidden pitfalls before even setting out? These days, the sense of irritation such a supposedly easy process creates has become as familiar a part of the holiday experience as OD'ing on sunscreen.

Nor is it just when dealing with airlines that such problems are rife. Almost every aspect of our lives is now controlled and driven by online technology rather than people. Where once there were experts to guide and advise us, today there is a cheerless screen, and an escalating sense of frustration or panic.

Probably it's a generational thing, but I can't help wondering if the digital age is an improvement on how things used to be done. I don't for a second deny the importance and value of the technology which is now an integral part of our existence. I do question, however, how faceless and quixotic it has become.

Whether it's banking – there are more lottery

winners than folk within easy reach of a branch – or buying a train ticket, we are obliged to navigate a digitalised realm in which some of us feel, at best, uneasy. Transferring large sums of money online is like believing in the afterlife: off you send it, more in hope than certainty that it will reach its destination and not simply vanish, leaving no trace beyond a Munch-like scream.

I remember the day the bank manager in Dunbar called me in to approve my first mortgage, taking time to chat and ask after my parents. What at the time felt like a scary commitment was eased by knowing there was a familiar figure to turn to should anything go awry. Now, online brokers will arrange a mortgage with a web-based company nobody's ever heard of. There's not much comfort in that.

What remains puzzling is the speed at which so-called progress has moved. By my estimation, at least a quarter of society is not entirely comfortable using a QR code for their Glasgow to London train ticket, or their boarding pass to Las Vegas. What if your phone is filched from your pocket, just before departure? What if the battery dies? A paper ticket is much more dependable, leaving you to worry about bigger things, such as whether you locked the back door.

There are hazards even for simple journeys. The train from where I live goes through long stretches of wifi-free territory, the digital equivalent of the Milky Way. ScotRail staff must dread these dead zones, where everything goes on hold. In parts of Europe, where high-speed trains spend half their time in tunnels, it is a hundred times worse.

The problem with so much basic administration

going digital is not merely the need to learn new ways of doing things, and having the devices this requires. It goes far deeper than that. The sense of isolation and inadequacy it generates in those of us trying to manoeuvre our way through what feels like a minefield is corrosive. There's an unsettling feeling that people are being airbrushed from sight, leaving each of us to fend for ourselves.

Once – and it's not all that long ago – every aspect of running our lives was connected to a physical location, whether that was a council office, travel agent or box office. Now, much of what we do feels ethereal, invisible, beyond our ken. Worse still, beyond our control.

Of course the online world has improved or

speeded up how certain things work – online shopping is a boon, as is booking appointments without waiting to get through by phone, or even being able to talk to a GP without going to the medical centre. But do such benefits outweigh the disadvantages? Are the aggravations and inefficiencies worth it? We no longer expect customer service, or a helping hand, or a bit of banter at the reception desk to ease anxiety or confusion.

Far from making our lives simpler – which is surely the intention? – it makes them more complicated and inefficient. Nor is there anywhere you can contact to ask for advice or complain. Visibility and accountability are virtues that disappeared along with the analogue age.

## BRIDGE UNFILLING

**FNE readers will remember** our report in September 2021 about Highways England (HE), now renamed National Highways, making the extraordinary decision to infill a bridge at Great Musgrave on the erstwhile section of the North Eastern Railway between Appleby and Kirkby Stephen in Cumbria, England, thereby blocking the route to walkers, cyclists and a possible heritage railway project.

We reported that Eden District Council ordered Highways England to apply for retrospective planning permission. This they did and it has been refused. National Highways has been

instructed to remove the concrete.

The original work, based on a flawed structural assessment, cost £124,000. The removal of the infill concrete and return of the bridge and its adjacent embankments to original condition is expected to cost a further £431,000.

It is to be hoped that National Highways' future decisions on old structures are made after consulting engineers who understand how these structures are built, rather than on mere intuition which seems to have been the case here.

**Ian Budd**



# ADRIAN SHOOTER

CBE FRENG FIMECHE

**FoFNL was sad to hear** that Adrian Shooter, whose excellent book about his time at Chiltern Railways was reviewed in our September 2022 issue, died on 13 December aged 74. Adrian had been diagnosed with motor neurone disease.

In a statement written by him and released by his wife after his death, he described how his symptoms had rapidly worsened, and said that "by the time you read this I shall have gone peacefully to sleep in a clinic in Switzerland".

In a sentence which would make a fitting epitaph he once wrote, "All I ever did was create the vision, hire the very best people and then help them to do their best. They, not me, were the people who delighted our passengers."



*Adrian Shooter face to face with a bust of himself which he had just unveiled at Marylebone Station on 30 August 2022. Photo: Chiltern Railways*

**Ian Budd**

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## FRANCE ACTS ON SHORT HAUL FLIGHTS

**On 2 December 2022** the French Government's plan to abolish flights between cities which are linked by rail with a journey time of less than 2½ hours was approved by the European Commission (EC).

As part of its policy of reducing environmental damage the French Government also intends to limit the use of private jets for short journeys, as this is seen as an issue of fairness for the population as a whole.

Initially the ban on short flights will only affect services between Paris and Nantes, Lyon and Bordeaux.

These measures were initially contested by the Union of French Airports (UAF) and the European branch of the Airports Council International (ACI Europe). However, after an investigation by the EC it was agreed that an article in the European Air Services Regulation could be invoked. The article states, that where there are serious environmental problems a government can decide to limit or refuse the exercise of traffic rights, in particular where other modes of transport provide a satisfactory service.

This is an example of legislation being required in order to effect modal shift.

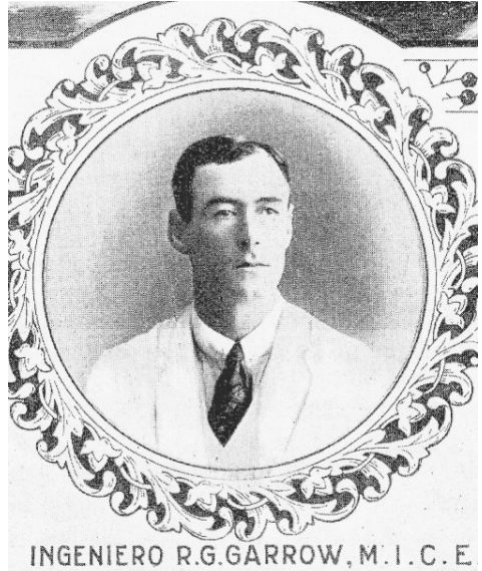
It is to be hoped that the UK and Scottish governments follow suit, but perhaps with even stricter rules. Aircraft emissions per passenger are obviously much higher than for any other means of transport. The success of the Lumo services between Edinburgh and London in attracting air passengers shows what can be done.

**Ian Budd**

# ROBERT GARROW

*Far North Express 87* mentioned the civil engineer Robert Garrow who was the son of William Garrow, the Highland Railway's superintendent of the line.

Robert Garrow joined the HR in 1893 as a pupil of Murdoch Paterson, the chief civil engineer. His application for membership of the Institute of Civil Engineers in 1904 records that Garrow took part in the parliamentary surveys and prepared plans for proposed railways including "Fortrose to Cromarty, 15 miles; Forsinard to Melvich, 21 miles; and also for a light railway system through the Island of Skye", as well as for the Dornoch, and Wick and Lybster Light Railways. Other experience listed included being the assistant resident engineer for the extension from Stromeferry to Kyle of Lochalsh.



In 1900, after being the resident engineer for the doubling of the line between Blair Atholl and the County March, Garrow moved to the Caledonian Railway. Here he was the resident engineer for the extension of the railway pier and station at Oban. This was followed in 1905 by two years as the resident engineer for the contractor Charles Brand on the enlargement of Kirkcaldy harbour.

For four years from 1907 he worked for the Egyptian Public Works Department on the construction of dams and barrages. The director of reservoirs for the Department was another former HR civil engineer, Murdoch Macdonald (later Sir Murdoch Macdonald MP).

The experience in Egypt led to Garrow's appointment as engineer for the major irrigation work which the Buenos Aires Great Southern Railway was carrying out in the Rio Negro Valley on behalf of the Argentine government. The *Inverness Courier* for 19th May 1911 noted that this was a post he was 'excellently qualified' for. The project included a canal 75 miles long, reservoirs and a dam and brought 125,000 acres under cultivation at a cost of £1 million.

During 1916-1919 he served in the First World War with the Royal Engineers, mainly on irrigation schemes in the Middle East. He was awarded the CBE in 1919 for services with the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force.

After the war Garrow returned to the Buenos Aires Great Southern Railway in 1920 as chief engineer. He was the second former Highland employee to hold this post, as a predecessor from 1898 to 1903 was Charles Mills who had been involved with the construction of the Aviemore line.

Robert Garrow retired to Scotland in 1930, just as the construction of several new lines was being completed and the mileage of the BAGSR was nearing 5,000. His last address before his death in Edinburgh in 1932 was Scotsburn House, Kildary.

**Neil Sinclair**

Family connections: the article Neil referred to in *FNE 87* mentioned Donald Stuart's wife's great uncle, William Garrow, father of Robert. It is interesting to note too that Murdoch Paterson, mentioned at the beginning of the article is FoFNL member and railway author Anne Mary Paterson's great granduncle. These links with the pioneering work on the Highland Railway are fascinating.

# HST REACHES NORTH



[Above] Heading South, crossing the Helmsdale River, south of Kinbrace.

[Below] Heading East on the Wick branch, the train is seen skirting Loch Watten.



**Approaching Thurso. On the horizon is the Orkney island of Hoy, and just seen on the far right is the northernmost point of the UK mainland, Dunnet Head. Photos: Niall Laybourne**

