

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



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THE MAGAZINE OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

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Cover Photo: A classic Far North Line springtime view - 37422 *Victorious* crossing the Loth Burn east of Brora in late May 2023.

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

This is proving to be a difficult time for our politicians - both here and in Westminster. Public discourse is beginning to swing away from the apparent consensus that we need to reduce pollution, eliminate our reliance on fossil fuels and at the same time try to do things in the most energy-efficient way, i.e. stop wasting energy.

From the transport point of view there are obvious solutions, but of course these involve not only a change in personal behaviour but some loss of choice and even extra expense. It's easy to agree what must be done, until it is one's own convenience or money which is affected.

The wrangle now taking place over the extension of the ULEZ scheme to Greater London, and the passionate debate about the future of two Scottish roads, have caused a collision between what people say they want and the realisation that they may be personally affected by it.

Unless all political parties agree on what must be done, the danger of being voted out of office rears its head and affects party and parliament members' actions. It would be pointed out that no party can achieve anything if it's not in power, therefore policies must be made

attractive to voters. Unfortunately that is probably an unreachable goal.

In the end voters' decisions are more affected by personal desires than 'the good of all'. The media, which could perform an effective educational role in pointing this out, is often more tempted to pursue campaigns which will gain public support and chime with the requests of powerful lobbyists.

Politicians are going to have to find some collective courage in the near future. Leadership is required, and that often means explaining unpalatable truths. The temptation for some politicians to resort to party politics and the 'Trumpian' method of trying to win an argument by insulting the views of other parties must be resisted. The recent example of labelling one of the parties which expressed doubt about the wisdom of spending billions on road projects as "car hating" is a case in point.

On the face of it, all the Scottish political parties support moves to eliminate our reliance on fossil fuels and to curtail energy wastage, so a considered discussion on how to achieve this would be far more beneficial than infantile point-scoring.

Ian Budd

SAVE THE DATE!

The 150th anniversary of the completion of the Far North Line is approaching fast. The final section was authorised on 13 July 1871 and the line opened for public traffic on 28 July 1874.

The history of the Caithness section of the FNL is interesting. The line between Thurso and Wick was authorised some years before, in 1866. It was to be built by the Caithness Railway which had plans to extend southwards at a future date. It proved impossible to raise the funds and in 1871 the Sutherland & Caithness Railway was formed to extend northwards from Helmsdale, replacing the unbuilt Caithness Railway in the process.

The Duke of Sutherland came to the rescue again and contributed £60,000 - £10,000 more than the other main contributor, the Highland Railway Company. Nearly 67 track miles were completed from scratch in three years!

We don't know yet what form any celebration will take, but please 'save the date'!

PANDORA DREAMS AGAIN

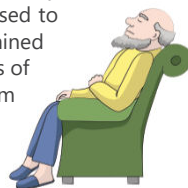
Last night I dreamt I went to Waverley again ...

... and was amazed at the changes 30 years had wrought. There was a screen listing all the departures in the next couple of hours with the Ultra High Speed services highlighted. The Paris and Berlin trains alternated each hour with the Rome and Madrid ones. As with the trains to London, passengers had to present themselves 30 minutes before departure to one of the two dozen e-passport readers. Despite earnest attempts to negotiate with the English government, trains between pan-Europe countries passing through England - still a staunch refuser of the pan-European concept - such formalities remained.

I watched a couple travelling with two children and their holiday luggage. When the father showed his e-passport to the reader, the gate beside the machine opened and allowed him to put his cases onto the conveyor. I remembered the system which was used in airports before they fell into disuse when air travel was banned within pan-Europe. The machine's voice welcomed him and his family (using the children's names - a nice touch) and issued a plastic card to give them access to the train's waiting lounge. As they went off I heard the mother tell the children how her parents had struggled with luggage when she was a girl.

I looked at the screen again. The Scottish services (all listed as ScotElec) were far more frequent than they had been - trains went to Glasgow every 15 minutes, but even those to Aberdeen and Inverness were now every 30 minutes. "Surely there can't have been enough passengers to justify such a frequency?" I asked one of the uniformed Assistants by the e-passport readers. She gave me a strange look. How else would people get to Aberdeen if there were no trains? I mumbled about being a stranger and she told me that until about five years earlier people had owned their own individual transport. "They banned them because they caused too much pollution. Now the only - cars, they called them - are police and emergencies. All the stuff that lorries used to carry are on the f-trains." As I looked blank at the mention of f-trains she explained that during the night special trains loaded with goods of all kinds ran to all parts of Scotland. "And in England too, I think. I took my kids to see a lorry in a museum once. Hate to see one of them rushing along."

As I was turning to leave I saw a handwritten sign on a board. It told me that a loop of some kind in the Far North was due to be opened by the Highland Commissioner the following week.



NEW AIRPORT STATION IS EMERGENCY TERMINUS

On Sunday 11 June the signalling system in Inverness was disrupted by a lightning strike which caused a loss of power. The strike took place in the early evening and Network Rail reported that all night shift staff were on the site including the Mobile Operations Manager and permanent way and signalling & telecommunications staff. The nature of the fault proved difficult to diagnose and technical support was required to assist those on the ground.

Trains into Inverness from the south were unable to go beyond Aviemore, but passengers travelling from Aberdeen were luckier as the new station and signalling at Inverness Airport Station allowed trains to terminate within reach of the city.

Another, perhaps less obvious, benefit of the new station.

AGM & CONFERENCE 2023

Our 2023 AGM & Conference was held in Timespan in Helmsdale on 23 June. As always this was a great opportunity to meet members and catch up.

The AGM covered the usual business matters but also marked the end of Mike Lunan's 18 years as a committee member, many as Convener. Mike's contribution has been very significant and we wanted to show our appreciation by making a presentation. A book seemed most appropriate - but not a railway book - we thought he would have lots of those already. Knowing Mike's extensive interest in music, and especially his enjoyment of Wagner operas, we found a book about the great composer and his rather controversial politics. This should take Mike's mind off worrying about the FNL, at least for a while!



The conference opened with an encouraging welcome from our President, **Jamie Stone MP**. He reminded us what a beautiful route the Far North Line is and how important it is that we continue speaking up for it and keeping it in the forefront of people's minds.

Our conference is always an opportunity to hear about the many aspects of the railway. We were again fortunate to have excellent speakers, and for those who missed the conference their slides are on our website where they will remain for a few months.



Our opening speaker was **Chris Gibb**, [left] who was the first CEO of the newly-formed Scottish Rail Holdings. He had left this role by the time of the conference, having been frustrated by ministerial over-reach - his talk was not about this though, instead he guided us through his remarkable career on the railways. It

was a pleasure at the lunch break to hear him chatting with FoFNL Committee member Iain MacDonald about their shared experiences as signalmen!

Our next speaker was **James McCaffery** of Stadler, the Swiss train manufacturing company which is now at the forefront of rolling stock development. FoFNL has expressed admiration for the Stadler Class 755 trains on Greater Anglia as being an example of the kind of train we would like to see on the Far North Line. James' presentation showed us the flexibility of Stadler's train designs where, in order to respond to the differing needs when replacing diesel traction, combinations of battery, hydrogen and OLE are



designed in to the basic layout of the trains. This also means that the stock can be modified as needs change.

Martin Bignell, our final speaker, is the Scottish and Northern Representative of the Rail Freight Group. Martin gave us an insight into future trends in freight and provoked some interesting discussion. The Far North Line could benefit from more flexible freight possibilities than the long container trains which are so common in the densely-populated parts of the country. Mixed passenger and freight was mentioned - this being something which was familiar on the line in the past.



The conference usually ends with an update on the work of HITRANS. However this year saw the absence of **Frank Roach** (FoFNL's founder) who had been called south to attend *Modern Railways* magazine Innovation Awards where his Request-to-Stop project was a candidate.

Frank asked me to read out his report from these bullet points:

- Request to Stop has been shortlisted for two awards
- The feasibility of reopening Evanton Station is contingent on the construction of the Delmore Loop
- The Inverness Station Masterplan is moving forward, albeit slowly
- Georgemas pipes - it looks probable that these will be carried by sea in future because the pipe wagons are life-expired
- Flow Country timber from Altnabreac - a long term contract for supply is needed for rail to be used
- Preliminary discussions on Highland waste by rail to Dunbar are taking place
- FNL leisure passenger numbers are looking stronger than they have been for a number of years
- Opportunity Cromarty Firth - business case for the full freeport project is underway with much negotiation with the UK Government
- HITRANS is taking on the lease of Primrose Cottage, the former car hire premises in Strothers Lane next to Inverness Station. This will avoid any future tenancy vacation issues

The final item we covered was the announcement of the designation of a new Community Rail Partnership for the Caithness and Sutherland part of the Far North Line, which was made at Holyrood on 24 May.

Mike Willmot, the FoFNL member responsible for the restoration of Helmsdale Station, is the FNLCRP secretary. He spoke briefly, outlining the aims of the new organisation, and Ian Budd followed by welcoming the formation of the group and explaining the difference between FoFNL and the FNLCRP. The two groups will liaise about common issues but the CRP emphasis is on promoting the use of the line and its many attractions, whereas FoFNL's emphasis is on independent campaigning to government and the operators for better services and facilities.

It was most enjoyable to hold the event in Helmsdale but unfortunately not as many as we'd hoped ventured so far north (or south!). Our timings could not fit well with the railway timetable, so quite a few attendees had to leave before the end of the conference. We will try and choose future venues with this in mind.

Ian Budd

CONVENER'S REPORT

When settling down to write this report the first thing I did was to read through the Convener's Report given at last year's AGM. This was a somewhat depressing experience and reflects the glacial progress of most, if not all, railway projects.

The extra ingredient facing us now is the financial fallout from Brexit, Covid and the war in Ukraine. This means that every suggestion and enquiry is met with the same response – money.

In transport matters the Scottish Government is in turmoil because of the passionate demands being made, even by members of the governing party, to dual the remaining sections of the A9 between Perth and Inverness immediately.

If some of the politicians and the media are to be believed it is now probably too dangerous to venture onto the single-carriageway sections of the A9, or presumably any other single-carriageway road. Thus eye-watering sums are potentially being spent on the A9 and the A96 whilst the Highland railways generally languish with less infrastructure than they had in the 19th Century. Back then the railway companies were well aware of the need to invest in more double track, but as privately-owned entities they simply couldn't raise the money to do the necessary work and had to make do with passing loops – many of which have since been removed. Now, in enlightened times, when it is understood that railways are a community service, not a profit-making business venture, the fight for funding has moved to having to persuade politicians to allocate funds sensibly.

Much money does need to be spent on roads, such as the A9, where there is dangerous traffic conflict at junctions. Grade-separation, and/or left-in-left-out arrangements, would remove many of the current danger points. This would of course be far cheaper than full dualling.

To meet its decarbonisation commitment the government will need to pay for the electrification of around 120 single-track kms per year for the next 12 years, it's hard to see how this can be afforded unless the Scottish Government follows its Welsh counterparts and completely changes the rules applied to roads spending.

I reported last year that the Delmore Loop was likely to proceed soon. A year later and nothing has really changed – the latest news is that Transport Scotland is waiting for Network Rail to finalise the design, and propose costings for the work. This is expected to be completed during the summer. It is rather worrying that the cost of building the loop now seems to be counted as part of the proposed enhancement to the service pattern laid out in the FNL Review Team Report. Transport Scotland will then decide whether the project is affordable. If the whole package is seen as too expensive the loop may be sacrificed. The intention is there, but...money.

At least in the last few months there have been major upgrades to the RETB system which will allow for the installation of the loop as well as strengthening the radio performance.

On the other subjects mentioned there has been little or no change at all:

The Inter7City service is no longer diagrammed to be HST only, since the units are too expensive to run and prone to faults. This still has a knock-on effect on the upkeep of the ageing Class 158s that the Far North Line relies upon.

The timber loading facility at Altnabreac is no further forward since there are no suitable wagons available.

There has been one notable achievement, which is good news for Far North Line passengers wishing to fly from Inverness Airport. The new station near the airport opened in February and of particular importance to the railway, the necessary track and signalling was put in place as part of the works to allow West Fraser to install a siding which would be used for timber entering the factory and product leaving it. This would give an added incentive for timber wagons to be found.

We are pressing for an extra Sunday service on the Far North Line. Currently there is just one train each way to and from Thurso and Wick, and because it is the same train it does a return journey leaving Wick around Midday and Inverness around 6 p.m. There would obviously be a cost implication, but if enough extra travel resulted that could be minimised.

As well as concentrating on the bigger issues we perhaps need to do more to help the day-to-day

experiences of passengers. There's room for substantial improvement of things such as reliable and accurate local information being available at every station. We flagged up many problems in our 2022 Station Survey and over a year later most of these are still outstanding.

We are working with the Scottish Association for Public Transport on a joint submission to Transport Scotland's Head of New Fleet Procurement & Delivery in which we'll give our passenger-orientated view of the quality of train needed on the rural/scenic routes in Scotland.

FoFNL is also currently working with Network Rail, ScotRail and the marketing faculty of Strathclyde University to arrange for a post-grad student to gather information from people who live within reach of the Far North Line, but don't currently use it, to ascertain their reasons and

establish the kind of changes needed. FoFNL is contributing a significant sum to the cost of this and ScotRail is offering a travel pass to the student for their fact-finding travels on the FNL. There may well also be money available from other funding bodies.

As always, the year has been busy with attending conferences, meeting with ScotRail, Network Rail and Transport Scotland people and attending meetings with other organisations. We have also been responding to requests for comment in the press and writing letters to newspapers and magazines.

I hope that next year's Convener's Report will contain more positive news, and a shorter waiting list of things still to be done.

Ian Budd

A COMMUNITY RAIL PARTNERSHIP FOR THE FAR NORTH LINE

Press release:

After more than three years of preparatory work, a voluntary committee has been successful in its application to the Scottish Government to have the Caithness and Sutherland section of the Far North Line (FNL) designated as the 9th Community Rail Partnership (CRP) route in Scotland. The announcement was made by the Scottish Transport Minister, Kevin Stewart MSP, at an event to celebrate community rail across Scotland held in the Scottish Parliament on Wednesday the 24th of May.

This designation should bring real benefits to the local communities along the line and also create opportunities to promote the line, its communities, and the attractions that it connects. CRP status provides an opportunity for greater community involvement in planning, development and operation of the line. The main aims will be to increase passenger footfall in local communities, promote social inclusion, increase the use of sustainable travel, and bring about improvements to the stations and services of the line, hopefully growing passenger numbers.

The FNL CRP will help communities to develop and deliver community projects, events, and activities that will encourage visitors to slow down and enjoy our amazing villages and settlements, creating economic opportunities as well as moving people away from the tourism hot spots and the speed of the NC500. This will be done by recruiting and coordinating a group of active volunteers in each community which in turn will offer opportunities for our local businesses which are essential to the sustainability of our fragile communities and crucial in our aims to reverse depopulation and create younger, more dynamic communities in the future.

The added benefit, and another crucial aim, is that through promoting sustainable travel by developing low carbon transport initiatives (including promoting cycling and walking opportunities that start and finish in our local communities) as well as encouraging people to use the train, we will help our climate challenge aims and reduce emissions, helping to move towards the goal of Net Zero.

Scottish Minister of Transport, Kevin Stewart MSP said "Community Rail Partnerships are the

embodiment of very passionate and dedicated people who volunteer on our railways. The work they do improves stations and lines across the country, bringing together communities, and giving greater local buy in to Scotland's Railway. That is why I am delighted to approve and welcome the new Far North Line Community Rail Partnership."

David Watson, Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust Manager and FNL CRP Chair, explains: "The Far North Line is a world class but underperforming asset. The journey itself is an amazing experience with an incredible variety of natural and cultural assets along its length. Although it is restricted by its engineering it presents an amazing opportunity to help sustain the communities that it serves. The CRP will form a link between the railway and local communities, bringing together a range of stakeholders, including local businesses and services, along the rail corridor to develop and promote the line, the local communities, and its attractions."

It is also hoped that the Partnership can boost tourism and make the rail service more responsive to local needs. There is renewed interest in sustainable transport not just between train and bus but through use of other transport resources such as e-bikes, and community transport schemes. Michael Willmot, Director of Helmsdale Station CIC and CRP secretary says: "recognising there has been growing concern about the number of cars and motorhomes that have been attracted by the success of the North Coast 500 promotion, this CRP should help to develop alternatives to private vehicles for exploring the North

Highlands Region as well as providing improved public transport for local communities. There are amazing opportunities for visitors to slow down and immerse themselves in the unique culture of Caithness and Sutherland."

In delivering its ambitions, the Far North Line CRP will work in partnership with ScotRail, the local rail user group - the Friends of the Far North Line, and representatives of communities and tourism organisations along the route. David Simpson, ScotRail Service Delivery Director, said: "I wholeheartedly welcome the establishment of the Far North Line Community Rail Partnership. "We look forward to the journey ahead and the positive impact that the CRP will undoubtedly bring in enhancing the route's potential as a vital lifeline and catalyst for economic growth throughout Caithness and Sutherland."

The current members of the management group include a number of experienced community development professionals with a track record of raising external funding and delivering successful community projects. The group also has representation from Venture North (the Destination Management Group for Caithness & Sutherland) and the North Highland Climate Hub, to ensure that we are truly promoting sustainable tourism development with environmentally responsible projects to help the future of the communities of Caithness and Sutherland for years to come.

If you are interested in receiving further information or in joining the CRP Management Group, please contact Michael Willmot at helmsdalestation@gmail.com

HML ANNIVERSARY

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

1 November marks the 125th Anniversary of the completion of the Highland Main Line in its present form, when the final section between Daviot and Inverness was opened. Prior to this the line had reached Inverness by way of Boat of Garten, Grantown-on-Spey and Forres. The new route saved 25 miles.

Sadly the Chief Engineer of the Highland Railway, Murdoch Paterson, died on 9 August 1898, a few weeks before the opening of the line.



THE A9 CAMPAIGN

Transport news and discussion in Highlands media this year has been dominated by the campaign to force the Scottish Government to complete the dualling of the A9 between Inverness and Perth. While the pleas for this to be done had until recently been based on the perceived lack of 'connectivity', there has been a shift in campaigning to mentioning safety issues alone. It was always hard to understand how the existing A9 represents a lack of connectivity anyway. As rail campaigners, we are acutely aware of the need for safe transport, and pleased that rail is by far the safest way to travel. The problems on the A9 have several causes, the greatest of which is probably conflicting traffic movements when joining or leaving the road. Turning across oncoming traffic is inherently dangerous, and is made more so when undertaken by travellers from countries which drive on the right, who can easily become confused. Dual carriageways do not solve this problem, as can be seen further south on the A9. There are two solutions: grade-separated junctions and left-in-left-out (LILO) arrangements. Neither of these require dualling and both would be far cheaper, and be in place to save lives far earlier.

Highland newspapers, especially the *Press & Journal*, have been running a major campaign to have the dualling of the A9 completed as soon as possible. In fact it is not the most dangerous road in Scotland in terms of deaths/injuries per person/km, although that is not obvious from the campaigning.

Dualling a single carriageway road is certainly one answer to removing dangerous overtaking. However, we'll never be able to afford to do that everywhere, so perhaps the government would be well advised to try and tackle this problem with driver education. Meanwhile, the bottom line for Highland transport as a whole is that money is needed now to meet the Scottish Government's own modal shift targets. The Highland Main Line needs more than electrification, although this will undoubtedly help. It needs significant investment to gain extra capacity and better timekeeping via more passing loops and/or doubling, as do the other Highland lines, including the Far North Line.

The Welsh Government understands that major road projects are unaffordable at present, whereas in public at least, the Scottish Government does not.

As FoFNL Convener I wrote the following letter to the *P&J* which was published on 1 August. It was published under the heading **Let's take politics out of A9 debate:**

Sir, - For rail campaigners, watching the A9 dualling issue unfold is a deeply frustrating experience. What should be a simple discussion about how best to make use of the limited transport funds available in Scotland has turned into something where views in favour of full dualling of the road are held with a fervour which brooks no alternative solution.

Although far more people and freight currently travel by road between Inverness and Perth than by rail, this has to change, and it is Scottish Government policy to make the change.

In order for that to happen, money beyond the £57m spent on the single track Highland Main Line in recent years needs to be allocated. It therefore makes absolute sense to look at far cheaper and quicker road improvements to replace the dangerous junctions on the A9 than the upwards of £5,000m and many years' work required for full dualling.

Since no country can afford to prevent dangerous overtaking by dualling all single carriageway roads there has to be a solution combining more aggressive signage and warnings, and education of some drivers in the amount of road space they need to overtake safely.

Our organisation is non-political, as should be the whole transport discussion, yet we see Douglas Ross describing the Green Party as "anti-car extremist". This is a disappointing level of debate,

especially since the cause of this description was apparently Mark Ruskell suggesting the above road improvements.

May we return to a sensible, thought-out discussion?

Unfortunately, "upwards of £5,000m" in the third paragraph was edited out. Since contrasting the probable cost of dualling with the recent £57m investment on the HML was one of the main points in the letter, this was disappointing - perhaps it was an unwelcome comparison.

Two more letters on the subject appeared in the following days:

Impatient drivers should slow down - P&J, 7 August

Sir, – The letter from Cameron Talloch (August 5) describing the frustration of drivers in a queue behind a lorry on the A96 pretty well sums up the reason for accidents on most Scottish roads, which is that lethal combination of an aggressive and impatient driver in a modern fast car.

If people would allow more time for journeys, and adopt a patient attitude to traffic, there would be fewer accidents and no need to improve roads that are already quite adequate for the low traffic volumes we have in Scotland.

It is the skill and attitude of drivers that needs upgrading, not the roads.

Malcolm Parkin, Kinnesswood, Kinross.

Railway in north could be answer - P&J, 12 August

Sir, – The A9 dualling is getting a lot of publicity lately and deservedly so. The railway? Nothing. Surely the rail connections should also be in the limelight?

With the additions of a few rail loops, a fast train service between Inverness and Perth and Inverness to Aberdeen could be introduced on both routes. I've travelled on all four routes, road and rail, over the years.

It's time for the railway system for the north of Scotland to modernise, reducing both road haulage and car traffic.

Anyone who has travelled by train in the EU will know that we are stuck in the dark ages here.

Roderic Kyle, Alford.

Then on 22 August the *Press & Journal* carried an opinion piece by Professor Jim Hunter, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of the Highlands and Islands, under the heading **Upgrading Scotland's railways at the same time as its roads would be just the ticket.**

Dr Hunter made many good points about the whole transport system in the Highlands. Describing a recent trip he commented:

I could have driven to Fort William. Non-stop, the drive would have taken me a bit over three hours. Longer... if, as would be a virtual certainty at this time of year, I'd got stuck behind a lorry and campervan convoy on the Loch Lomond section of the A82, a road with more turns and twists than a corkscrew.

Courtesy of ScotRail, and including 20 minutes between trains in Glasgow's Queen Street Station, I got to Fort William in something like four-and-a-quarter hours. But at £26.85, my day return fare (reduced, to be sure, by my Senior Railcard) came in way below the cost of an equivalent car journey. And the rail trip was an altogether more enjoyable experience than the drive would have been.

Instead of staring for what can seem like hours at the back end of the sort of truck that can so readily obstruct your progress, I was able to sit back in my window seat and take in unfolding vistas of a grandeur seldom on offer for as little as the few quid asked of me.

His enjoyment of the train journey gave him pause to consider:

...to make the kind of trip I made last week is at once to wonder why, in this country, we give such a dismally low priority to railways. As someone who was, for years, one of that road's frequent users, I very much get current pressure for an upgraded A9. But why not a simultaneous push for long overdue investment in the rail network?...Our rail routes, after all, are exactly as they were when laid down in the reign of Queen Victoria...[i]magine how things might be if tracks were to be upgraded, the network expanded, electrification made universal and – by way of boosting the drive to net zero – both rail and public transport more generally made truly affordable.

On the affordability front, we'd do well to follow Germany. There, it's presently possible to get, for the Euro equivalent of just £42, a pass that entitles you to a month's unlimited and nationwide rail, tram and bus travel.

One day, perhaps, we'll have politicians with the wit to follow Germany's lead.

Although at present both the *Press & Journal* and members of Scottish Provincial Press, such as the *Inverness Courier*, are preoccupied with the A9 campaign, they have in the past been keen to point out the need for real investment in the Highland rail network as well. This editorial from the *Inverness Courier* in 2015, on the occasion of the appointment of a contractor to carry out Phase 1 of the Inverness-Aberdeen improvements, makes interesting reading:

On the face of it, it appears good news - a principal contractor has been appointed for the £170 million upgrade of the Inverness-Aberdeen railway line - and to some extent it is.

Any investment is welcome and although the scheme will move as slowly as one of the route's antiquated trains - it is going to be about 15 years before all the improvements are completed - there are some short-term benefits.

By 2019 infrastructure will be created to enable local transport body Hitrans to build a halt at Dalcross (although, sadly, not at the airport), signals will be upgraded, 16 miles of double track laid between Aberdeen and Inverurie and a new station built at Forres. There will be more peak time trains between Inverness and Elgin and a half-hourly commuter service between Aberdeen and Inverurie.

But it still feels like tinkering with a route that is little altered since Victorian times. And when compared with the £3 billion estimated cost of dualling the A96 by 2030, £170 million is small change.

Good road links are vital to Inverness and the A9 dualling in particular is an important project which is long overdue. But it is equally important that the Highland capital sits at the heart of a modern inter-city rail network and that remains a distant dream.

Despite some minor improvements, journeys to Scotland's other major cities are painfully slow and barely changed from 100 years ago. One of the reasons we are so reliant on the A9 is that the railway is not an attractive alternative for anyone wanting to do a day's business in the central belt and travel in relative comfort. Tellingly, we understand there is talk of introducing commuter flights between Inverness and both Glasgow and Edinburgh for the duration of the A9 roadworks, a clear indication that no one really believes the train is capable of taking the strain.

Yet all the evidence points to people being happy to switch to rail if the services are fast, regular, convenient and reasonably priced.

The recently reopened Borders Railway, an initially controversial £294 million investment, is barely able to keep up with demand and carried 125,000 people during its first month of operation. Passengers complained about being crammed into two-carriage trains and having to stand for the entire journey, forcing ScotRail to try and increase capacity by borrowing carriages from other routes. Nevertheless, earlier this month two services had to be cancelled and replaced by buses because the trains looked like becoming dangerously overcrowded.

The new railway has gained international publicity and is already boosting investment and tourism in the Borders in a way that no new road ever could.

It is the same story elsewhere in Scotland. Annual passenger journeys on ScotRail have surged 35 per cent over the past decade, from 68.7 million in 2004/5 to 92.7 million last year.

Locally the reopening of stations in Beaully and Conon Bridge have helped some of the peak-time traffic pressure on the Kessock Bridge, but in strategic terms Inverness is being left behind by this quiet rail revolution. The risk is that if the dualled A9 and A96 suck more people off the trains and onto the roads, passenger numbers will dwindle and the much-needed investment will never come. In fact, we are more likely to go backwards.

Money is scarce, we acknowledge that. But bringing a rail line up to 21st-century standards is cheaper than building a dual carriageway and equally important.

We would urge the Scottish Government to look again at the Inverness-Aberdeen line and devise a scheme to enable fast, inter-city trains to run alongside regular commuter services and incorporating a proper link to Inverness Airport. If necessary, ministers should re-examine the need to dual the entire A96, or at least the timescale for doing so, in order to find the cash.

[Editor's note: Please remember that the above was written in 2015.]

It's interesting, illuminating, but usually in the rail context somewhat depressing, to look back at things people have said or written. Anyone with any doubts about the Scottish Government's failure to address the lack of proper intercity services into Inverness should consider these:

In the April 2013 edition of *Far North Express*, FoFNL convener John Brandon noted, "The Scottish Government is concentrating on the A9 and A96 accesses to Inverness – £3 billion for the former is the latest budget price – whilst procrastinating over improvements to the rail infrastructure. There is still nothing for the Far North Line in any government announcements. It's as though railways barely exist north of the Central Belt and not at all beyond the Caledonian Canal."

In oral questions in Parliament on 25 September 2014, Liz Smith MSP asked the Deputy First Minister "What action is being taken to reduce rail journey times between Perth and other Scottish cities?" Nicola Sturgeon replied that there will be substantial improvements to the Highland Main Line and commented "We are committed to a rolling programme of electrification which includes routes to Dundee, Aberdeen and Inverness".

In the following year, on 23 March 2015, Nicola Sturgeon attended a ceremony in Inverness marking the launch of the new Caledonian Sleeper franchise in which she said, "*People in the north should not have to choose between good rail links or better roads.*" A statement which the current Scottish Government would do well to bear in mind.

Although most of the debate at present is about the A9 and A96, which might seem somewhat removed from the Far North Line, any improvements to our neighbouring routes would also be of tremendous value to our line and its passengers and freight. If the Scottish Government can be persuaded to ensure that sufficient funds are available for the necessary expenditure on *all* the Highland railways we might see more passing loops on the Far North Line, along with a restoration of the end to end journey time that pertained before the 2005 deceleration, when 25 mins was added because of new safety procedures.

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

In the midst of the intense campaigning from the Highland press to fully dual the A9 between Inverness and Perth it is refreshing to see an article reminding readers that transport is not just about roads.

A quote from the Kevin Costner classic *Field of Dreams* may sound a little trite, but this cliché is true when it comes to Scotland's under-funded railways. Whenever government has invested in the rail network, passengers have inevitably followed.

We saw it when the old Waverley Line reopened between Edinburgh and Tweedbank back in 2015. We saw it when a defunct station was brought back into use in Laurencekirk in Aberdeenshire back in the noughties.

And, closer to home, we've seen it before when new stations were opened at Conon Bridge and Beauly in the Highlands. Inevitably we'll also see it when the first passenger figures emerge from the brand new Inverness Airport Station, which opened just this year.

If you build it, they will, and indeed *do*, come. This was something particularly noticeable in the Highlands back in 2014 and 2015 when major roadworks took place on the Kessock Bridge and people abandoned their cars in their droves in favour of a rail commute from Beauly, Muir of Ord, Conon Bridge, Dingwall and further afield.

Certainly, there's much to commend about taking the train - from the environmental benefits and lack of traffic congestion stresses, to the ability to work on the go (this particular reporter has been known to design newspaper pages on his laptop while ensconced at a table on the way to or from the office).

Even the price of a train works out cheaper than the fuel in your car once you factor in the half-price tickets that all Highlanders on the Far North, Kyle and West Highland Lines are eligible for through the Highland Railcard. This applies to all services on said routes and is a real bargain that friends living outwith the region are really rather envious of. It's a perk we really need to make more of a song and dance about. Because it's really not something that's all that common.

But, however well we package it, train services simply haven't been reliable enough.

Indeed, the many delays hitting services meant that passenger numbers out of obvious commuter stations were beginning to suffer even before Covid ripped the rug out from underneath the network.

Then factor in the staffing issues that seem to affect all sections of the economy in this post-Brexit world - and those other staffing woes which also notoriously affected food trolleys on Caithness trains even before then - and it's clear things aren't all rosy.

What we need is investment. ScotRail has promised to make its services carbon neutral by 2035 - so that presumably means the days of the Class 158 diesels that currently ply their trade on many of our routes are numbered?

But even if any shiny new trains do come to pass, what good is new rolling stock if a big part of the problem lies underneath those trains' wheels? It's the rail network itself that's the key issue - and for too long government has promised big and delivered little. Anyone remember the much vaunted transport priorities that were published way back in 2008? One of the top three was dualling of the Highland Main Line, which is currently just single track. Others, like a new road bridge over the Firth of Forth, came to pass years ago, But the Highland Main Line? Not a sausage.

And it's not just the Highland Main Line that's an issue. Rail passengers and campaigners have been banging their heads against a brick wall for years over what is dubbed the lack of a "Lentran Loop" Most of the Far North and Kyle lines are single track, with only short sections of double line at some stations to enable trains to pass each other in either direction.

Sometimes there's a significant gap between these passing areas too. And, in the case of the stretch between Muir of Ord and Inverness, it only takes one train to be late for a domino effect to hit a bunch of others.

Indeed, anyone who has ever caught the 5.12 p.m. Inverness-Ardgay service will know only

too well the sinking feeling that comes with realising the 12.34 p.m. Wick-Inverness train has been delayed.

'The latter is timetabled to arrive in the Highland capital only six minutes before the Ardgay train is due to depart. Over the course of its four-and-a-half-hour journey delays are not exactly unheard of - heck, on the day I wrote this piece the 12.34 p.m. was cancelled altogether. If it's running 30 minutes late then the Ardgay train - with all those commuters aboard eager to get home - is left sitting idle in the station.

What makes it all the more irritating is that such knock-on disruption wasn't always the case. Lentrán between Inverness and Beauly once had a station, and although the station is long gone and its passing loop ripped up, the space where the loop once stood is still part of the railway.*

All it would take to significantly reduce the knock-on impact of those sorts of delays would be the reinstatement of this short section of second track. The land already belongs to the network, and the space for it is sitting there

waiting.

But despite transport experts and politicians alike all seemingly recognising this work's importance, it has gone absolutely nowhere.

How many other similar 'easy wins' are out there? For there are most certainly others - take the people of Evanton, who are clamouring for the reinstatement of their former station, and in the meantime have to suffer the indignity of watching multiple trains whizz through their village each day without stopping. The track is already there and in daily use - it just needs a platform.

If stations like this were to be reintroduced, and if basic improvements like the Lentrán Loop were *finally* sorted, passenger numbers would go up. We've seen it before.

If they build it, they will come. But it needs a lot less pontificating from those in power. We need a lot less "if" from them and a lot more "will".

Philip Murray, *Inverness Courier*, 28 July 2023

* As regular readers will be aware, Lentrán Station was on the six-mile section of double-track which the Highland Railway opened in 1913. The company had various plans to improve capacity on its predominantly single track railways but was unable to afford most of them. The need for a way for trains to pass each other on the busy southern end of the Far North and Kyle Lines was obvious then. The double track was removed in 1966 but a loop was left at Lentrán until 1988. We have campaigned for years for the whole six-mile section to be redoubled, or at least a 'dynamic loop' installed, allowing trains to pass at speed. However, as always, funding is limited and a short passing loop is now planned instead for Delmore, near Inverness. The urgent need for this loop was established by the Far North Line Review Team in 2016.

37261, *Caithness*, passing through Lentrán Station on 31 August 1987

Photo: David Price, from *The Kyle of Lochalsh and Far North Lines*



TRANSPORT STASIS

In *FNE* just a year ago (*FNE* 87 p22) I wrote:

“Funding for everything has got more difficult in the present uncertain economic climate. Highland schemes which have slowly and painstakingly worked their way up the pecking order are particularly vulnerable to being put on the ‘To Do’ shelf waiting for the purse strings to ease. When the money situation does ease, history has shown that their funding bid has to start again, but in a new situation where they are competing in an expanded pool with other new and desirable schemes which have since appeared. We have seen this so often before.”

Never could I have imagined what is now happening: two road schemes dominating transport discussions and potential funding. This overshadows work on, and funding for, lifeline ferry services for the islands and peninsulas served by Caledonian MacBrayne, Northlink, and those funded by councils such as Orkney Islands Council (which is struggling to meet capital requirements for new vessels); work to restore and provide efficient and reliable bus services to tackle the 38% decline in local routes between 2007 and 2023 shown in Traffic Commissioners’ statistics, and much needed rail infrastructure investment for capacity and speed to encourage modal shift.

Scottish Government climate change targets are bold, but do they yet show up in current and future transport planning? Do all the Transport Scotland directorates strategise together to achieve modal shift? There is little sign yet of any noticeable migration of freight from road to rail or even of government action to ensure that this does happen.

For example, the whisky industry could be encouraged to switch raw materials and product to rail. This would have the benefit of removing many lorries from the A9 and the A95 in Moray, but the single track railways would need more and longer passing loops to accommodate this traffic. Does this feature in current plans? A fraction of the huge whisky taxation revenues which go direct to the UK Treasury could contribute to the cost. Politics already has recent precedent for sharing “levelling up” funding

from both Edinburgh and Westminster in the City and Region Deals.

A long term issue in general terms is how consolidation of infrastructure investment has benefited the Central Belt rather than being strategically inclusive of the whole of Scotland, including the peripheral regions. The superb Aberdeen to Inverurie rail redoubling should have been followed by the investment required to provide the promised two hour average journey time for passengers between Aberdeen and Inverness and three hours between Edinburgh and Inverness.

I was one of more than one hundred people in the Inverness Town House meeting after Cabinet on 5 August 2008 who heard the First Minister promise the latter by 2012. With the decoupling of the climate change brief from that of the new Transport Minister in 2010 the momentum was lost and road building prioritised. The journey has now increased to 3 hours 40 minutes.

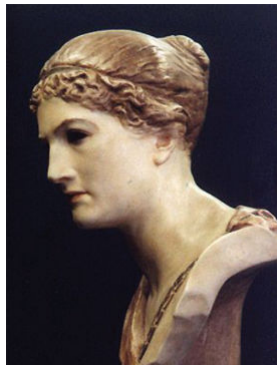
The Scottish Government now has so many other urgent funding priorities which have built up, including the unfulfilled and environmentally lauded transport ones that it seems to be in a state of stasis.

The recent Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 took far, far too long over “process” rather than making “progress” while the public finance situation continued to deteriorate. It then majored heavily on giving priority to projects that benefit the most people, rather than paying attention to the word “strategic” in their remit. Only strategy will give the more even standards of living required over the whole country. As the Scottish Chambers of Commerce CEO said as long ago as April 2016: “Scotland’s northern cities need to be better connected, and single track sections of the railways linking Inverness, Aberdeen and the Central Belt *are unacceptable* in the 21st century” [My italics].

Rail investment, such as the reopening of the Borders Railway and the branch to Leven is very welcome, but why is it taking so long to address the compelling needs of the Highlands?

Richard Ardern

CASSANDRA WRITES:



Many years ago my colleague Pandora wrote this.

"Any builder worth his salt knows that it's the modifications after the contract's been signed that pay for the yacht."

He bemoaned the fact that the DfT - and others who, at a lower level of incompetence, sign contracts for work - fail to heed the message. An article by Roger Ford in the current *Modern Railways* has stimulated Cassandra to shake her hoary locks in the hope that the message might be heard.

HS2 is the outstanding example. It is 10 years since the enabling Act of Parliament received Royal Assent. Euston was to be rebuilt with a certain number of new platforms; a Y-shaped layout was envisaged; connection was to be made with the West Coast Main Line (WCML). At the time, of course, no-one could have foreseen the effect that COVID would have on both the time needed and the world-wide inflation and disruption to supply chains. These inevitably have added several billions to the original cost estimates, but Cassandra believes that there will have been far more billions added by the folly of changing the specifications once the contract has been signed. Will HS2 go to Euston? Don't know, but probably (after all, decanting long-distance travellers onto the Tube at Old Oak Common is hardly going to encourage them to use HS2 in the first place). Will HS2 go to Leeds? Probably not. Will HS2 connect with the WCML at Golborne? Not if the local Tory MP has anything to do with it, and as he's the Head Honcho of the 1922 Committee he's not going to budge. Will HS2 get beyond Crewe? Maybe, but not for 20 years by which time four or five new Governments will have found it difficult to keep their hands off the "let's-make-it-cheaper" lever.

Roger Ford's article isn't about HS2 though. He describes a plan to re-signal the Welsh Marches line (which needs doing). A like-for-like replacement (ie. using modern kit, but not "enhancing" the infrastructure) would cost £X, but Network Rail (the guilty party this time) has added in a whole lot of extra signal-related work, making the cost almost £2X. Answer: the whole thing is "unaffordable".

At least NR has professional railway people making decisions, one or two of whom will be senior enough to forestall too much in the way of silliness. The DfT isn't so lucky. Bright young chaps fast-tracking their way up the Civil Service ladder will do their couple of years at the DfT before some of them achieve the glittering prize of a job at the Treasury. Few, if any, will be there long enough to understand the railway, its complicated structures and responsibilities, its long leads before a decision - even a wise one unaltered while it's being implemented - delivers an outcome. Few will care; none will be around when it goes pear-shaped - certainly not the Minister.

The answer is simple. Before making a big decision spend as much time as necessary (but no longer) gathering views and information. Think very carefully. Make the decision. Run it by two or three (never more) people whose wisdom and expertise will reinforce your choice, or force you to amend it. Announce your decision. Then go away and get on with something else. Let the builders build, knowing that the yacht is still only a pipedream.

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Question S6W-16592: Graham Simpson, MSP for Central Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 21 April 2023.

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S6W-15855 by Jenny Gilruth on 28 March 2023, by what percentage has rail freight increased in Scotland since March 2018.

Kevin Stewart: While the decision to use rail is for the freight customer and its logistics provider, the Scottish Government has shown leadership in facilitating modal shift to rail with significant investment and innovative regulatory targets for 2019 to 2024 and 2024 to 2029.

The rail freight target is measured in net tonne miles and, due to the commercial nature of freight, tends to vary considerably from year to year. Currently, there has been an overall 7.6% drop in net tonne miles since 2018 due to a general contraction in the markets for various reasons, including the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic and the global economy.

New traffic to rail was 2.9 million net tonne miles in 2019-20 and 48.8 million net tonne miles in 2022-23. This reflects the five new rail freight services which have started in Scotland in the last twelve months including a cross border express logistics services.

Question S6W-17250: Rhoda Grant, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, answered on 2 May 2023.

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S6W-14784 by Jenny Gilruth on 16 March 2023, whether it will directly address the issue raised in the question regarding when it will fulfil its commitment to reduce train journey times between Inverness and Edinburgh to 2 hours 45 minutes.

Kevin Stewart: I am unable to commit to a date for delivering this journey time. The costs and benefits for delivering this need to be considered against those for delivering alternative rail enhancement projects, notably those that will contribute towards the decarbonisation of Scotland's railway, within constrained funding.

In the meantime, as set out in our response on 16 March 2023, to PQ S6W-14784, Transport Scotland is, alongside industry partners, exploring options for lengthening passing loops on the Highland Main Line to enable longer and more frequent freight and passenger services.

Transport Scotland will consider these, and further infrastructure enhancements that would enable future journey time savings between Inverness and Edinburgh and Glasgow, within the constraints of available funding and subject to a robust business case.

Question S6W-19065: Beatrice Wishart, MSP for Shetland Islands, Scottish Liberal Democrats, answered on 29 June 2023.

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S6W-18017 by Kevin Stewart on 25 May 2023, for what reason it has delayed the publication of the Fair Fares Review to the end of 2023, and whether it can provide assurance that the Fair Fares Review will be published by this new deadline.

Fiona Hyslop: The Fair Fares Review is progressing well, with work underway with stakeholders and delivery partners to explore the challenges and opportunities facing our public transport system. Also, developing and assessing potential options for change that ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares that supports the long term viability of public transport in Scotland. This work will be supported by a broader programme of public engagement planned to commence later this summer.

It is vital that the Fair Fares Review is informed by the most robust and up-to-date evidence and accordingly the review will report by the end of this year in order to take cognisance of emerging evidence such as the Year 1 evaluation of the U22 free bus travel scheme and early findings from the removal of the ScotRail peak-time rail fares pilot. This report will recommend a package of measures that can be considered for implementation from 2024-25 onwards that provide opportunities to address the wider issues impacting on the cost and availability of public transport services across all modes of public transport and that will help ensure that the costs of transport are shared more fairly across government, business and society.

Question S6W-19424: Mark Ruskell, MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife, Scottish Green Party, answered on 7 July 2023.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress towards (a) decarbonising Scotland's passenger rail services by 2035 and (b) delivering the Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan.

Fiona Hyslop: Positive progress continues to be made with the electrification of the Glasgow to Barrhead Route and with plans for the electrification of the East Kilbride route now at an advanced stage. Plans for further electrification continue to be developed across the rail network in Scotland including Fife and the Borders.

The Scottish Government has been clear about the extent of the financial pressures the public sector as a whole is facing. The Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan is planned as a dynamic document, with a refresh of the Plan scheduled for later in 2023. The refresh will ensure Transport Scotland continue to prioritise the right projects, in the right place, and at the right time in line with available budgets.

Despite this, significant investment is also under way across Scotland in the form of new feeder stations required to provide the power needed to support the electrification of the network across Scotland.

VITAL SIGNS



Photo: Ian Watson

Work at Kildonan Station to install a very welcome automatic half-barrier crossing was completed a while ago. One of our members spotted this assemblage of useful and instructive signage attached beside the workers' facilities. We suspect the placing of the signs was more than coincidence!

SCOTRAIL DISCUSSIONS

In July I met with **David Simpson**, ScotRail's Service Delivery Director. We have very productive meetings twice a year covering many service issues. At this meeting I asked for news of catering provision on FNL trains. The service was withdrawn completely during the pandemic and the staff had either left or been redeployed. A successful recruitment campaign means that a full service will be provided from autumn this year.

Thinking about the problems unique to that season led the discussion onto the difficulties the Inter7City HSTs have with slippery rails caused by leaf fall. The power cars on these refurbished units are extremely powerful so there is a tendency for the wheels to lose grip when accelerating as well as problems of sliding during brake applications. This is hardly surprising when you consider that there is approximately 1cm² of actual contact per train wheel between the smooth surfaces of rail and wheel. The units were not originally fitted with sanders, and the WPS (wheel slip/slide protection) also needed to be renewed. WPS works in a similar way to ABS on a car - it detects uneven, or unfeasible changes in the respective revolution speeds of the train's wheels and releases the brakes until stability is achieved. Tenders for the £6m contract were invited in October 2022 and the work is expected to be completed by 2025, so by autumn 2024 some units will be equipped.



A sander on a class 387 train applying sand to the rail in a static demonstration

The death of a passenger who had a heart attack on a Far North Line train in June highlighted the possibility that his life could have been saved had there been a defibrillator on the train. The list of



Virgin Trains installed defibrillators on all its Pendolino units in 2014

railway companies which already have these devices on their trains includes LNER, TransPennine, Tyne & Wear Metro and the Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways; Edinburgh trams carry them too. It would seem appropriate for Scotland's rural trains to have defibrillators on board and, because they are effective for the first two or three minutes after cardiac arrest, perhaps all trains. Units cost around £1,500 and also require maintenance. There are currently 56 Scottish stations with defibrillators available and Mr Simpson agreed to investigate the possibility of carrying them on trains.

Finally we discussed concerns raised by FoFNL arising from our 2022 Station Survey. Most of these are actually Network Rail issues, but failings in station signage, especially with regard to local information, e.g. bus stops and routes, are ScotRail's responsibility. I will have had a meeting with their Customer Information Strategy Manager by the time this issue of *Far North Express* is published.

Ian Budd

ON YOUR BIKE ON THE TRAIN

DOES IT NEED A TICKET ATTACHED?

www

The recent upsurge of interest in cycling following major events has contributed to a strong demand for cycle spaces on trains.

In the Highlands, cycle reservations are mandatory - see photo of poster at an unmanned station on the Far North Line which advises booking at the nearest manned station which is over 25 miles away - so quite a major detour on your bike!

Cycle tourists can book online by checking which trains have cycle spaces remaining, however the system requires a ticket to be attached to the bike - that's the difficult part.

The next photo illustrates a total of 8 tickets required for one cyclist making a return journey from Beaulay to Thurso on the way to attend an event on Orkney. This involved a family member travelling to Inverness to collect the tickets in advance.

There is no ticket machine at Beaulay or any of the other Far North Line stations, and cycling to Inverness and back would not be a safe or a practical option.

A query was raised about this following a ScotRail presentation in Inverness recently.

A summary of the reply is given here:

Current industry cycle reservation requirements are that customers attach a reservation coupon to their cycle – this coupon is produced when the ticket is collected from a station. [However, the ScotRail website states: "(this) is not a mandatory requirement when travelling with ScotRail" - Ed.] Whilst we are working to upgrade our App to allow bike reservations to be made that way, it won't negate the requirement to collect the ticket and reservation from a station...

Reservations are on ScotRail's Active Travel Group agenda so that group will keep a watching eye, and I am sure as we get clarity it will assist in devising any change to processes. But it is not guaranteed that a change can be made or what that could be.



In the meantime, it appears that many bicycles on trains do not have tickets attached to them - the train conductor presumably checks that the cyclists on board have made a cycle reservation when booking - and can decide whether there is space left for any cyclists who have been unable to obtain a ticket in advance.

Could this form the basis of the practical solution that really needs to be formalised?

Neil Wallace

CRUISE SHIP CONUNDRUM

A press report described a very unfortunate incident at Inverness Station on 3 August. The headline was, "*Anger as rail passengers asked to get off busy Highland train*". The train in question was the 17:12 service to Ardgay which is used by commuters, but on this occasion it was also chosen by around 150 cruise passengers returning to their ship at Invergordon.

According to the newspaper some passengers were asked to leave the train and wait for the 17:54 Kyle service if they were not travelling beyond Dingwall.

FoFNL contacted a ScotRail official for more information and received an immediate reply. The train had become so crowded at Inverness that the conductor was unable to reach the back cab or close the doors. The solution chosen was to ask whether any Beaulieu and Conon Bridge passengers would be willing to wait for the 17:54 service. They all chose to do so and so the train was able to omit those stops. No passengers left the train at Muir of Ord or Dingwall and more boarded, 158 passengers alighted at Invergordon.

ScotRail is well aware of the anger this caused regular travellers as well as the fact that a number of cruise ship passengers were unable to board and had to make their own way to Invergordon. It is vital not to make local passengers feel that they are less welcome than tourists.

ScotRail told us that cruise ship passengers normally travel on the 14:00 or 14:50 services out of Inverness. However, the 2hr 22min gap before the next train at 17:12 does put that service at risk if the 14:50 is missed.



ScotRail has highlighted this performance risk internally and is looking at options to improve the situation.

The Inverness-based Class 158 trains have a seating capacity of 137 so an influx of 150+ cruise ship passengers cannot be accommodated without adding an extra two-coach unit to the service. The chances of there being a spare unit available are probably slim and could only really be guaranteed by leasing an extra Class 158 which might then lie unused most of the time at great expense.

The issue of tapping into the cruise ship market is problematic for ScotRail at present, but in the longer term, with new trains and some infrastructure investment, as discussed by the Far North Line Review Team, it may become easier.

It is worth noting that it is currently rather difficult for potential travellers, many of whom may not speak much English, to find out about the ScotRail services. The posters outside Invergordon Station are not specific to the station and the QR code on them simply points to the ScotRail website. If ScotRail wishes to attract 'spur of the moment' cruise passengers there needs to be a list of specific opportunities with train times and cost clearly displayed.

In an article by Rolf Schmidt in the September 2018 edition of *Far North Express* the problem with potential cruise passengers was pointed out:

"The obvious way to get more cruise passengers onto the Far North Line is to advertise it through the information stand at the foot passenger exit of the port. There may also be possibilities on-line.

Ironically, with this many potential customers (1500 in his example) we are at risk of seriously overcrowding the trains instead of just filling spare seats if the idea catches on."

Ian Budd

STATION TIMETABLE POSTERS

Letter to the Editor

Thank you for organising a most interesting AGM.

I was disappointed that my question to Chris Gibb about the lack of timetable displays on station platforms was more sidestepped than answered.

His reply majored on the perceived waste engendered by excess printed pocket timetables having to be thrown away. However, we are still left wondering why passengers cannot be given the courtesy, and reassurance, of timetable posters?

These give arrival times at the desired destination as well as scheduled departures for different times of the day so that passengers may also plan ahead for future journeys if they wish.

Richard Ardern

This raises the general issue of passenger information, which is one of ScotRail's most important duties. Although all information is always available on their website there are many reasons why this is not always an option.

There is no substitute for up-to-date timetable posters on stations, since these contain all the relevant information in an easy-to-read format. Not all passengers have access to a working mobile phone at all times.

On the question of pocket timetables, we understand that ticket offices are able to print timetables on demand, which could prove very useful.

ScotRail has introduced another difficulty to timetable users since the pandemic - up until then all timetables showed relevant connections with neighbouring routes (see below) so that if, for example, one were trying to schedule an event to which people would be travelling by train it was easy to see what time they would have to leave Edinburgh, Glasgow or Aberdeen to catch a particular train. This exercise, once achieved at a glance (see below), now requires using the ScotRail app and entering a series of possible scenarios - something which takes minutes instead of seconds.

It is very tempting, because of the cost savings in terms of staffing and paper, for ScotRail to assume that electronic formats can completely supplant traditional dissemination methods. If this process is taken to its logical conclusion ScotRail will no longer be meeting its obligations to make train information available to all.

Ian Budd

	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	FSO				
Monday to Saturdays														
Glasgow Central	d	.	.	<i>0643</i>	<i>0643</i>	<i>0643</i>	<i>0944</i>	<i>0944</i>	<i>1015b</i>	<i>1315b</i>	<i>1315b</i>	<i>1432e</i>	<i>1719b</i>	<i>1910f</i>
Edinburgh	d	.	.	<i>0633b</i>	<i>0633b</i>	<i>0633b</i>	<i>0933b</i>	<i>0934b</i>	<i>1035c</i>	<i>1336</i>	<i>1336</i>	<i>1437b</i>	<i>1743</i>	<i>1944</i>
Aberdeen	d	.	<i>0614</i>	<i>0819</i>	<i>0819</i>	<i>0819</i>	<i>1013</i>	<i>1013</i>	<i>1200</i>	<i>1338</i>	<i>1527</i>	<i>1527</i>	<i>1822</i>	<i>2014</i>
Inverness	d	<i>0702</i>	<i>0855</i>	<i>1038</i>	<i>1100</i>	<i>1142</i>	<i>1335</i>	<i>1400</i>	<i>1450</i>	<i>1712</i>	<i>1754</i>	<i>1828</i>	<i>2106</i>	<i>2333</i>
Beaully	d	<i>0717</i>	<i>0910</i>	<i>1053</i>	<i>1115</i>	<i>1157</i>	<i>1350</i>	<i>1415</i>	<i>1505</i>	<i>1727</i>	<i>1809</i>	<i>1843</i>	<i>2121</i>	<i>2348</i>
Muir of Ord	d	<i>0725</i>	<i>0916</i>	<i>1059</i>	<i>1121</i>	<i>1206</i>	<i>1356</i>	<i>1423</i>	<i>1511</i>	<i>1733</i>	<i>1815</i>	<i>1849</i>	<i>2127</i>	<i>2354</i>
Conon Bridge	d	<i>0732</i>	<i>0923</i>	<i>1106</i>	.	<i>1213</i>	<i>1403</i>	<i>1431</i>	<i>1518</i>	<i>1741</i>	<i>1823</i>	<i>1857</i>	<i>2134</i>	<i>0001</i>

At a glance - necessary departures from termini of main connecting routes are shown in italics. This 2016 timetable lists departure times from Glasgow Central because Queen Street was closed for line electrification and station rebuilding.

NIGHTMARE AVERTED

Letter to *The Guardian*
31 July 2023

When I was eight-and-a-half months pregnant, I travelled by train from London to a friend's wedding in the Scottish Highlands. On the way back, the train pulled into the town of Pitlochry and an announcement was made: we would stop here for 10 minutes. I decided to go for a short walk along the platform. Instantly, the train doors shut behind me and it pulled away – with my sleeping husband, phone, wallet, etc inside. I ran after it banging on the window but it continued on its way southwards. I looked about and there wasn't another soul on the platform.

As I considered whether to laugh or cry, I made my way towards the ticket office, hoping against hope that there might be someone there (it was a Sunday). Miraculously, there was. He radioed ScotRail to confirm that the wrong announcement had been made, and they agreed to pay for a taxi to Perth and to inform my husband to alight there.

While I sometimes wonder what my new life as a single mum in Pitlochry might have been like, I'm rather glad the ticket office was staffed.

Abby Semple, London

FARE COMMENT

FoFNL is looking forward to taking part in the *Fair Fares Review* later this year. The need for a radical improvement in the fares system, and its clarity to potential passengers is evident from this letter published in the *Press & Journal* on 18 May:

Sir, – I recently travelled by train from Glasgow to Tain. The cost of doing this was an unwelcome surprise. £72 each way is absurd when £72 is around the cost of a weekly grocery shop. I estimate that the journey could be done in a small car for considerably less [e.g. return trip c.400 miles @ 43mpg @ £1.46/l = £62 - Ed.]. In a country so reliant on tourism and supposedly promoting rail travel it is absurd that such exorbitant fares are charged.

Feelings of resentment do not subside upon arrival at Inverness Railway Station. The terminus of the spectacular Highland Main Line is dilapidated and unappealing.

A hungry traveller is confronted with a small selection of exorbitantly overpriced offerings. A dismal array of sandwiches, mostly containing meat, are proffered by the station's newsagents at the ambitious price of £5.49 each.

If the railway company is serious about attracting and retaining customers then they should urgently consider whether the services and facilities they provide represent good value for the traveller's money.

Dr Charlie Lynch, Belfast.

Clearly Dr Lynch didn't spot the return option, so one wonders whether ScotRail has tested its website design on people unfamiliar with the system. Fares have increased since May, so if travelling today he could have bought a return for £82.60 instead of two singles at £75.50 each. If he knew about split-ticketing he could have reduced the price to £72.80 return by purchasing returns from Glasgow to Inverness and Inverness to Tain. If we had a fixed cost-per-mile system none of this would happen.

Meanwhile it's hard to disagree with Dr Lynch's comments about Inverness Station - eventually it will be replaced as part of the major redevelopments being planned, but that is years away. It would be good too if businesses such as WH Smith were able to keep their prices down for the fairly captive passengers' market, although clearly this is outwith the control of Scotland's Railway.

Ian Budd

In a report, *Plane speaking: Moving journeys from air to rail*, published by the Campaign for Better Transport (CBT) in July 2023, it was revealed that when comparing the top 23 domestic and near-Europe flight routes substitutable by rail, modal shift from air to rail is already feasible:

"On three fifths of the routes travelling by train on the lowest price ticket was cheaper or there was no significant price difference."

"When accounting for travel to and from the airport, pre-departure checks and passport control, the train is faster than the flight the majority (70%) of the time."

For example, the report shows that flying from Edinburgh to London Heathrow costs between £60 and £300 by air versus £24.90 to £145.70 by rail.

Taking into account travel time to the station or the airport and airport security and check-in procedures, the train journey can be accomplished 20 mins quicker than flying. On shorter journeys the time-saving becomes progressively greater. CO₂ emissions per passenger are 132.35kg by plane, and 14.53kg by train.

CBT has issued a challenge to the UK Government in its *Fewer Flights Charter* which calls on the Government to:

- Require airlines to give passengers realistic travelling times for domestic flights
- Require airlines to publish carbon emissions for domestic flights and the equivalent rail option
- Introduce a domestic flight reduction target
- Introduce a tax on domestic aviation fuel
- Reverse the cut in Air Passenger Duty for domestic flights
- Introduce a new rate of Air Passenger Duty for all private jet passengers
- Apply VAT to every private jet flight
- Penalise airlines for flying empty aircraft unnecessarily
- Invest in more railway lines and stations and improve fares and ticketing.

CBT spokesman Silviya Barrett said, "Travelling by rail within the UK and to the near continent is much more environmentally friendly than flying but also, as our report proves, in many cases cheaper, faster and more economically productive. Yet people simply aren't aware that this is the case.

"To help incentivise train travel more and reduce carbon emissions from transport, we need to see government policies which ensure rail is always the easier and cheaper option so that more people can choose the train over the plane."

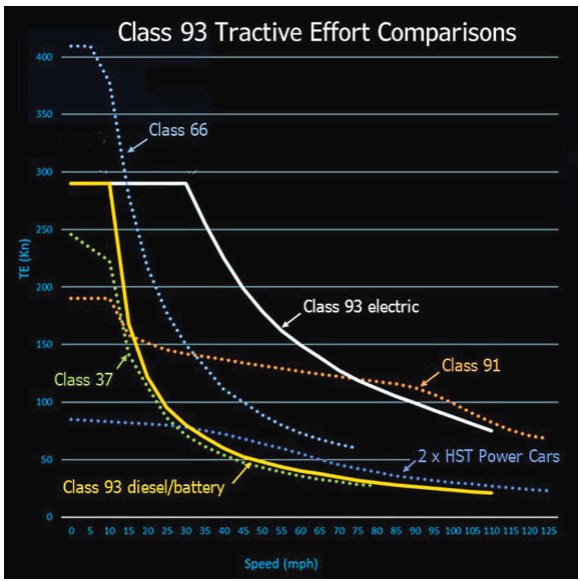
This is a very welcome campaign, but from the point of view of Far North Line users, the recent announcement of a 29.5% increase year-on-year in passengers flying between Wick and Aberdeen between April and June points up very effectively the difficulty of achieving modal shift to rail in our comparatively remote location. Many travellers have far to go and the FNL was not built for speed. The lack of investment to change this, from the missed opportunity in the 1980s to include rail in the Dornoch Bridge, to the 20-25 min slowdown of 2005 which has become permanent, has left us with a service running at an average speed of around 40 mph. Wick to Aberdeen by train takes around 7 hrs and the trainline.com website rather perversely gives the distance as the crow flies - 97 miles - it's over 250 miles by train!

CLASS 93



Rail Operations Group, the train movements specialist, announced the delivery of the first of its Class 93 tri-mode locomotives. ROG has ordered three batches of ten machines. Stadler, the Swiss manufacturer, has based the Class 93 on its *Eurolight* design, the Class 88s already running in the UK have the same roots. Intended for long-haul electric freight services they are also able to run in hybrid diesel/battery mode and for shunting in battery-only mode. The diesel engines can run on bio-fuel which is considered by some to be carbon-neutral. *Rail Engineer* magazine had an interesting chart [below] in its April 2021 issue showing how a Class 93's tractive effort compares at various speeds, and in both electric and diesel/battery modes, with a selection of existing locomotives.

This shows that when running in diesel/battery mode its performance is the exact equivalent of a



Class 37 (commonly used on the Far North Line) and in electric mode when running at its maximum speed of 110 mph it has double the tractive effort of a pair of HST power cars. Also in electric mode the Class 93 has twice the tractive effort of a Class 66 diesel at 75 mph. This illustrates the benefit of electric freight traction, especially on the West Coast Main Line with its curves and gradients.

Grand Union Trains, an open access operator, has specified the Class 93 for its proposed Stirling to Euston service. These locomotives can match the performance of the Class 91s that were the mainstay of the high speed services on the East Coast Main Line for many years, proving them to be true mixed-traffic machines.

Ian Budd

ORKNEY RED WHEEL

On 12 May Britain's most northerly Red Wheel was unveiled by John Cameron CBE in celebration of the Churchill Barriers at the Barrier View Café, with whose proprietor Celina Rupp he can be seen in the photo on the right.

Originally designed to protect the deepwater anchorage at Scapa Flow against incursion by German U-boats, the four Barriers were built by Balfour Beatty with the initial work carried out by civilian labour, later joined by Italian prisoners of war when the definition changed so that they would form a roadway connecting the Orkney Mainland with neighbouring islands to the south. The Italians left their own legacy in the form of the beautiful chapel on the first island, Lamb's Holm. Official opening was exactly 78 years ago on 12th May 1945 by the First Lord of the Admiralty A.V. Alexander MP, creating a fixed link between the island capital of Kirkwall and the southern part of St Margaret's Hope.

John told his audience "Orkney is uniquely rich in heritage across all eras – Neolithic, Norse and



twentieth century – and you have so much to tell us looking forward as to how we might live sustainably in the years to come. The Churchill Barriers that were built to protect against a repeat of the Royal Oak tragedy have gone on to provide inter-island connectivity, allowing the southern islands to retain a larger population than might otherwise have been possible. At a time when Scotland sometimes looks enviously at what is happening in the Faroes and Norway, we should remember what was achieved nearly eighty years ago in linking The Orkney Mainland with Burray and South Ronaldsay to the lasting benefit of these communities."

Photos and article: John Yellowlees

DUNROBIN UPDATE

www

Work on restoring the Fourth Duke of Sutherland's private locomotive, Dunrobin, to working order, is progressing at the Severn Valley Railway's workshops at Bridgnorth. The locomotive, built in Glasgow in 1895, last steamed in 2005 whilst still in Canada where it had been since 1965.

Dunrobin is now owned by the Beamish Museum in County Durham, where it will be based once returned to running order.

In July Paul Jarman, Assistant Director (Design, Transport & Industry) at Beamish published this comprehensive update on Dunrobin's progress on the Beamish blog.

1: Looking at the striking livery of Deep Bronze Green with black and straw embellishments, it is worth recalling that these wheels (and tyres plus front axle) are brand new! They were produced when it was discovered that the original coupled wheels were extensively cracked, and beyond economic repair. The were manufactured for the project by South Devon Railway Engineering, and should last another century or more, giving *Dunrobin* the best chance of having a long working life ahead of it.



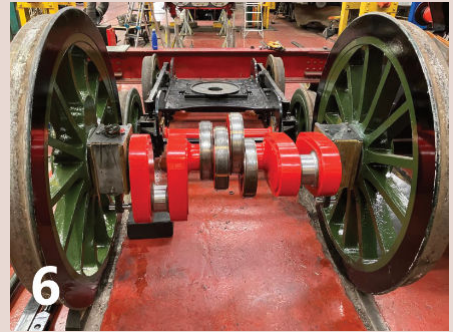
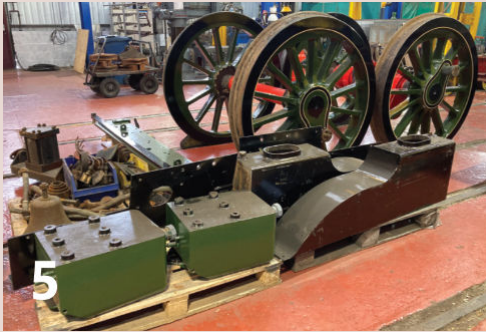
2: The bogie wheels were in good condition, and the work on the bogie has been confined to a general overhaul, before repainting. The cast pedestal which locates it under the rear end of the locomotive's frames has required repair, being cracked through some unknown occurrence in the locomotive's history.



3: The frames are seen here, in front of a BR locomotive, in the late spring, with the (new) cylinder block being aligned and fitted permanently. The items associated with this alignment are seen across the open cylinder ends in the next photo and also in the trailing coupled wheel horn guides (the bar projecting from the gap in the frames). By this stage the frames had been externally painted and lining applied.

4: A closer view of the new cylinder block – a substantial cost within the project that will be all-but invisible once the work is completed. Again, we hope that such investment will create longevity, especially given the light duties the locomotive will enjoy for most of the time.

5: A gathering of items, being prepared for fitting to the locomotive, or assessment for what repairs are needed. The two sandboxes are particularly noticeable in the foreground, and the front coupled-wheel splashers are to the right of them.



6: The crankshaft is original, but has been overhauled and the journals skimmed. The trailing coupled wheelset also has the axleboxes sat on the journals in readiness for the frames being placed back onto them.

7: At the beginning of June, *Dunrobin's* frames were lowered onto the coupled wheels and bogie – an assembly that is now permanent.



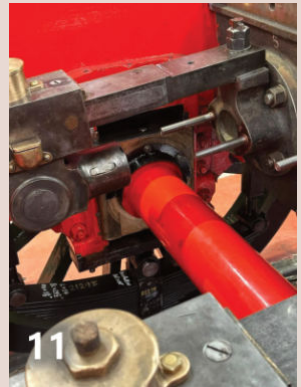
This marks a great step in the progress of the project as the locomotive's overhauled components begin to come together. Also of note here is the removal of the bunker/rear cab, which is to be replaced as the metal is fairly thin in the original components, and would have compromised the water tank at the base of the bunker, as well as rendering the coal space liable to perforation.



8 & 9: The frames in the process of being lowered onto the wheelsets and bogie...



10: The valve gear has received a great deal of attention already, the crosshead being seen following completion and awaiting installation (since completed). Assembly of the motion/valve gear will form the next phase of work at Bridgnorth.

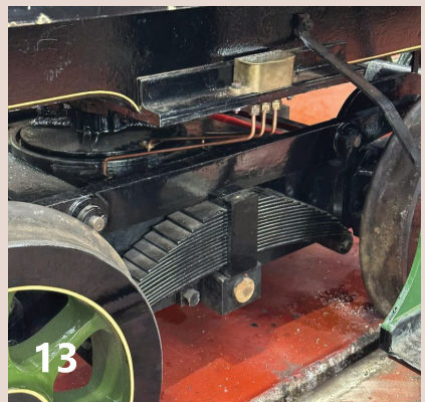


11: With the slidebars fitted and aligned, the crossheads are now in place. Also of note are the seals around the axle collar/axlebox interface, to prevent accumulation of dirt and dust on the journals.

12: A wider view of the slidebars and cylinder block in place. In Canada, various means had been contrived to provide a lubrication system that could be used without a pit. These modifications have been removed and the original (or close to) specification has been restored.



13: The lubrication pipes for the bogie have been made, and terminated at the brass oil box, mounted on the frames.





14

14: The bunker/cab components following removal and before dispatch to enable them to be copied and replaced, work that will be sub-contracted.



15

15: New tanks and cabsides have already been manufactured by the Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railway, and are stored at Bridgnorth in readiness for assembly onto the frames. These were made a few years ago and have been given a protective coat of green paint – they will, of course, be fully repainted when fitted onto the locomotive.



16

16: Progress on the boiler has reached the stage where it can readily be completed and tested. The inner firebox has now been fitted and manufacture of stays is underway.

For now, we are refraining from announcing any likely completion date for *Dunrobin*, but as you can see, the end is very much in sight, and is aligned with the planned reinstatement of steam operations at Rowley Station in 2025. As with all transport news at Beamish, do keep checking the blog for the latest news...



MANX CONNECTION

FoFNL member Frank Faulkner recently returned from a rather damp visit to the Isle of Man where he discovered an interesting connection with the Far North Line.

This year has been named *Year of Railways* on the Isle of Man because The Isle of Man Steam Railway celebrates its 150th anniversary and The Manx Electric Railway celebrates its 130th anniversary.

It is the former which has a direct link with the Far North Line in the person of the 3rd Duke of Sutherland.

The Duke was instrumental in the establishment and financing of the Isle of Man Railway Company and was Chairman of the Board from 1872 to 1879, soon after opening his own railway from Helmsdale to Golspie. It is reported that he regretted not building the latter in narrow gauge, which he said would



Sutherland c.1894 at St. John's Station



Sutherland in steam in 1998

have saved him a lot of money!

Locomotive No 1 *Sutherland* is the original Beyer, Peacock & Co locomotive which hauled the first service train on 1st July 1873 and ran until 1964. After a period of display in the railway museum at Port Erin, No 1 borrowed a boiler from another locomotive to enable it to take part in the *Steam 125* events in 1998. The locomotive has since been cosmetically restored and now resides in the museum where it sports a replica of the *Douglas & Peel United* banner it carried at the opening ceremony of the line from Douglas to Peel in 1873.

These photographs were supplied by The Isle of Man Steam Railway Supporters' Association which was instrumental in saving the line from Douglas to Port Erin which reopened in 1967 after a brief closure.

The railway was nationalised in 1978 and features steam haulage on its 15¾ mile, 3' gauge route.

www.iomrsra.org

www



Sutherland in Port Erin railway museum

BOOK REVIEW

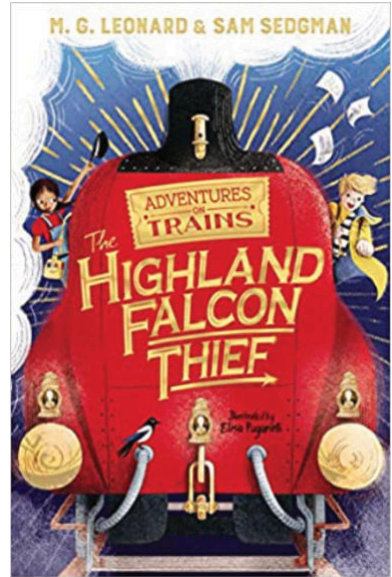
The Highland Falcon Thief

M G Leonard and Sam Sedgman

Pan Macmillan, 2020. £6.99 256pp

978 1 529 01306 1

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



This is an exciting book to give to, or read to, children or grandchildren aged between about 10 and 14. Older generations will also appreciate some of the railway detail.

Harrison Beck and his Uncle Nat are enjoying what is to be the very last journey of the Highland Falcon, Britain's most famous steam train, limited to around a dozen passengers including royalty.

Young Harrison and his new friend - stowaway Lenny, the engine driver's daughter, try to solve the mystery of the Princess' diamond necklace which has gone missing - they believe stolen by one of the passengers.

The train is hauled by the famous wedge shaped duck which holds the world record for steam traction and which is about to be retired into the National Railway Museum in York.

The train circumnavigates Britain from London Kings Cross along the East Coast Main Line through York, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, then Inverness, Perth, Glasgow, Carlisle, Settle, Manchester, Shrewsbury, Swansea, Bristol, Swindon and Reading to London Paddington.

The authors admit to taking a few liberties such as sending the train up to Ballater to allow the Prince and Princess to join. It is the Royal Train after all and includes the Royal Carriage and the King Edward Saloon. Another liberty allows us a first class description of lowering the tender scoop on the miraculously reinstated water troughs on the ECML. Nostalgic!

Read on and enjoy!

Richard Ardern

This is the first of a series of six *Adventures on Trains*, featuring Hal and Uncle Nat solving mysteries on trains round the world. [www.adventuresontrains.com]

[www.panmacmillan.com/authors/m-g-leonard/the-highland-falcon-thief/9781529013061]

RETB SUCCESS

www

Lee Clinton, Telent, Head of Operations (Scotland) posted on LinkedIn: "Great to be back seeing the recent enhancements to the Far North Line and how it's all settling in, seeing the benefits of the new request stops working, enhanced radio coverage, fast token exchanges. All making a real difference and benefiting the operational railway and travelling public.

"It's always very rewarding when I'm greeted by drivers and signallers who are pleased with the improvements, it makes it all worth it."

FoFNL echoes his comments - Telent is one of the unsung heroes of the Far North Line since the company is responsible for the RETB signalling system that keeps the trains running. Soon they will have the operation of point motors at passing loops added to their radio-control responsibilities.

Ian Budd

GREAT MUSGRAVE FINALE

It seems the final act of the Great Musgrave bridge drama is now being played out. In September 2022 Eden District Council issued an enforcement notice requiring National Highways (Previously known as Highways England) to remove the concrete infill they had installed in 2021 after declaring work on the bridge necessary to prevent an emergency, thereby invoking the Permitted Development Rights listed in the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015. These rights allow work to be carried out immediately with a retrospective planning application required.

Eden District Council refused planning permission in June 2022 and instructed National Highways to remove the 1600 tonnes of infill by 11 October this year.

Work began in July with a road closure being effected from 17 July to 13 October. The closure causes very long diversions for local residents and farmers and there is much local anger at its duration. There is a feeling that the length of time the road will be closed, and the unwillingness of National Highways to provide a temporary diversion on adjacent land, suggests the organisation is enacting some kind of retribution on those who opposed the infilling.

The demolition process involves 'coring' and 'hydrobursting'. The total cost of infilling, and then removing the infill and repairing the bridge, will be more than £500,000.

Perhaps one day the Stainmore Railway Company, will link its station at Kirkby Stephen East with its neighbour, the Eden Valley Railway, passing under the bridge at Great Musgrave.

Ian Budd



BOOK REVIEW

The Kyle of Lochalsh and Far North Lines

David Price, Amberley Publishing, 2018

ISBN 978-1-4456-8304-1

Softback: 96pp, 234x165mm, 180 photos. £14.99 [www](http://www.amberley-books.com)

Both for those familiar with the Far North and Kyle lines, and those yet to be amazed, this book is a wonderful photographic introduction to the beauty to be found, as well as showing a great variety of trains and motive power from 1973 to 2017, both native to the lines and visiting on tour.

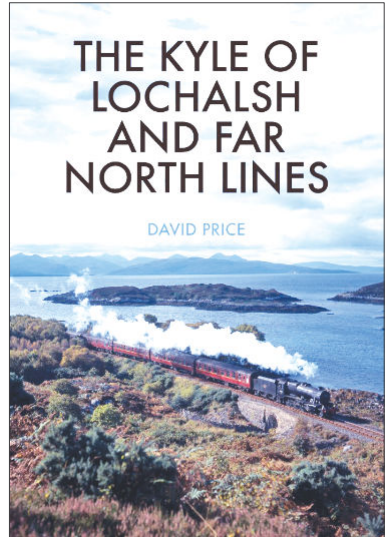
David Price first became interested in the railways north and west of Inverness when watching a 1963 TV programme covering the visits made by the preserved Highland Railway 'Jones Goods' 4-6-0 (currently to be found in the Riverside Museum in Glasgow).

When the railways were threatened with closure in the early 1970s the author began to travel the lines with his camera. He made many subsequent visits and recorded both routes in different seasons. The changes in the railway environment over the years are very apparent, as is the unchanging beauty of the scenery, no matter which time of year.

Apart from a short introduction and background note, every page contains two high-quality photographs. The reader is taken from Inverness all the way to Thurso in the first part of the book, with 44 pages of Far North Line photos. Beginning again at Dingwall, where the Kyle Line heads east, we travel to Kyle of Lochalsh where photos from 1973 through to 2016 show the changes that have taken place.

I thoroughly recommend *The Kyle of Lochalsh and Far North Lines* which was published nearly five years ago, but is still available (currently at a reduced price) from the publisher's website [www.amberley-books.com/the-kyle-of-lochalsh-and-far-north-lines.html].

Ian Budd



THRUMSTER ELECTRIFIED

Electricity reached the restored Thrumster Station on 16 July. Wick and East Caithness councillor Raymond Bremner performed the switching-on ceremony as the station was connected to the electric grid. The connection was jointly funded by the Scottish Hydro Electric Community Trust and Foundation Scotland. The trust was formed in 1998 by the Scottish Hydro-Electric plc (now SSE plc) to provide help to customers in the company's distribution area faced with high charges for an electricity connection. Foundation Scotland was founded in 1996 and helps find community project funding.

The beautiful station restoration was completed in 2017 by the Yarrows Heritage Trust whose previous chairman, Jay Wilson, is seen enjoying a lightbulb moment!

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

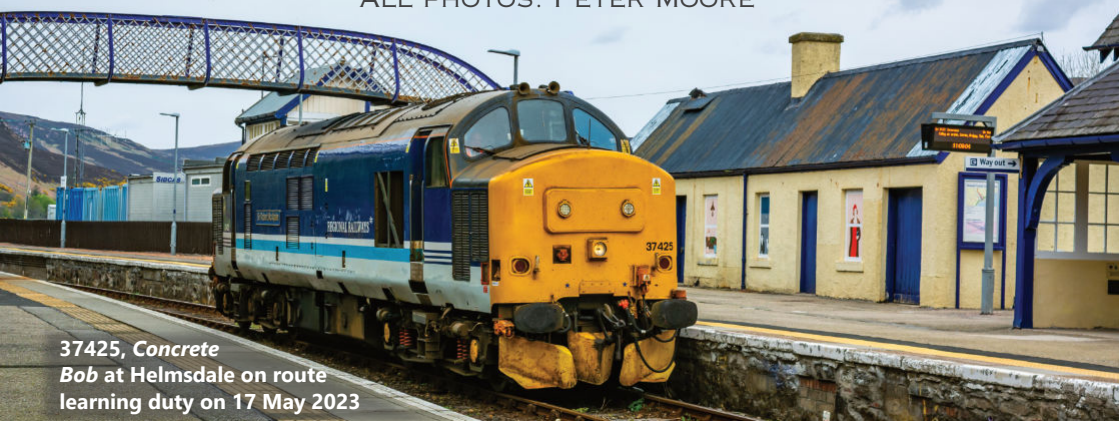


PASSING THROUGH



68018, *Vigilant*, passing Tain on 27 September 2022 with a northbound empty nuclear flask wagon

ALL PHOTOS: PETER MOORE



37425, *Concrete Bob* at Helmsdale on route learning duty on 17 May 2023



66738, *Huddersfield Town* waiting for the northbound service at Brora on 24 May 2023