

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

Issue 91
January 2024



THE MAGAZINE OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

£3.00

CONTENTS

Headcode - - - - -	3	Not As Easy At ABC - - - - -	20
AGM & Conference	3	Bike Stands Lottery	21
Pandora - - - - -	4	Dunfermline Customer Service Centre - - -	22
News of Defibrillators	4	Longitudinal Timbers Renewals	24
Delny Bridge Cancelled - - - - -	5	Bridge Refresh - - - - -	26
A Question of Capacity and Ambition	6	Miranda Cottage	27
Strung Along? - - - - -	8(i)	Jamie's Journal - - - - -	28
View From the Soapbox	9	Electrifying 'News'	29
Road to Ruin - - - - -	10	Cruise Ship Comments - - - - -	30
HS2 Beheaded	15	Caledonian Sleeper Experience	31
Parliamentary Questions - - - - -	16	Bus Experiment - - - - -	32
Station Usage Figures	17	Michael Field Video Productions	34
Notes From the Far North Line - - - - -	18		

www.fofnl.org.uk/fne/cps/fne91.html is a companion page with some web links and larger versions of pictures found in this issue. This sign on a page denotes available material: [WWW](#)

FOFNL OFFICE BEARERS

President:

Jamie Stone MP

Vice-President:

Rhoda Grant MSP

Maree Todd MSP

Convener and Editor:

Ian Budd, *Bishopbriggs*

Hon. Secretary:

Neil Wallace, *Kiltarlity*

Hon. Treasurer:

David Start, *Tonbridge*

Membership Secretary:

Angus Stewart, *St Andrews*

Committee Members:

Richard Ardern, *Inverness*

Iain MacDonald, *Alness*

Richard Mansfield, *Inverness*

Malcolm Wood, *Ardgay*

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

Website:

www.fofnl.org.uk

Facebook:

www.facebook.com/fofnl

E-mail:

editor@fofnl.org.uk

Editorial Address:

3 Villafield Loan,

Bishopbriggs,

Glasgow , G64 3NZ

FAR NORTH EXPRESS IS PUBLISHED IN JANUARY, MAY AND SEPTEMBER

Cover Photo: The 07:00 Inverness to Wick crossing the Caledonian Canal at the Clachnaharry swing bridge on Saturday 2 September 2023.

Photo: **Gavin Sinclair**

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

Inconvenient Truths

As we move more and more towards every transaction being done on our smart phones, with all the convenience inherent in that, and as we pay for things with cash less and less often, it is tempting for all the companies we deal with to send up a massive cheer at the thought of all the savings to be made.

As a state run business, directly funded by the government, ScotRail is under considerable pressure to save money.

The decision makers in all companies are quite likely to be of an age that is well used to digital transactions, and possibly find it irritating that some members of the public do not wish to use the ubiquitous technology.

The recent U-turn by the UK government down south which has removed the threat of extensive ticket office closures in England shines a useful light on the whole question.

If you look at the decline in the numbers of ticket office transactions since the introduction of ticket machines and online ticket purchase, and then construct a statistic such as staff-salaries-paid-per-ticket-sold-in-a-ticket-office, you will of course see a massive cost increase. But this is not the whole story of how public services must operate.

We are in a period where the intention of the Scottish Government is to reduce car travel and expect people to use the trains more. We talk all the time about the obvious need to invest in railway infrastructure and not in projects such as dualling the rest of the A9 between Inverness and Perth; thought must also be given to the

smaller elements of rail travel which are a barrier to those who could use rail, but prefer to use their car. To attract those people, many of whom are in the older age group, probably retired, there are many factors involved.

A good example is the link between ticket offices and station toilets. At Thurso, Wick and Dingwall there are toilet facilities available when the ticket office is open. The ScotRail timetable states incorrectly that the stations are fully staffed, yet in fact the ticket offices are only open for parts of the day. Are passengers who are aware that these stations are a good place to use the facilities expected to memorise those times?

One of my own regular journeys is from Bishopbriggs to Edinburgh, changing at Croy. There used to be a waiting time of around seven minutes, but when the service pattern changed after Covid this increased to twenty. Croy station has a warm waiting room in the ticket office, with a toilet. If the office is closed the waiting room and toilet are also closed, and all that's left is a small covered area where the ticket machines are, open at both ends, with a freezing cold metal bar to sit on and a cold wind howling across from the car park. If a service is cancelled the twenty minute wait becomes fifty. These situations, wherever they are, become known by potential travellers who will probably go back to using their car after just one awful experience.

A public service is for everyone, so when the economics of a particular aspect seem weighed against its continuance, this may have to be accepted as part of the service's necessary cost.

Ian Budd

FoFNL AGM & CONFERENCE

This year's AGM & Conference will be held on **Saturday 22 June** in Inverness. The venue is **TBC**. Please note the change to a Saturday - this is to accommodate a joint FoFNL/Far North Line CRP event at RSPB, Forsinard on the 21st, to mark the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Far North Line. Details of both days will be posted on our website and published in the May issue of *FNE*.

We currently have two of the three conference speakers booked - **Anthony Smith**, former Chief Executive of Transport Focus, and **Roger French OBE**, a well-known bus and train commentator, whose *Bus & Train User* blog is highly respected. Roger was manager of the Brighton & Hove Bus and Coach Company until his retirement.

PANDORA...

... finds little to make him optimistic about 2024, try as he might. The world does not have its woes to seek, and it's hard to see where alleviations may come from. Against such a background the travails of the railway seem of little consequence, but perhaps that makes them more tractable.

The last issue of *RAIL* for 2023, blessed editorially like all year-end publications with hopes for 2024, has as one of its wishes:

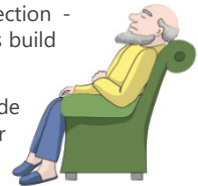
"If you come from England, resolve to look and learn from Scotland's attitude towards rail's potential."

Well, up to a point, Lord Copper*. It's generally true that up here we have better ideas about what the railway should look like in, say, 15 years. After all, we have - enshrined in law - plans for electrification of most services and the elimination of most polluting traction. Scotland's attitude to rail's potential is not in doubt.

However Scotland's ability to do much about it is in severe doubt. The Budget announced a few days before Christmas shows an £80 million cut in rail spending alongside a £230 million increase in spending on roads. No-one can doubt that the state of the roads is dire, but Pandora's gut feeling is that precious few potholes will be filled from this largesse. Loud voices continue to badger the Scottish Government to dual the A9, and each of these voices has a vote. Motorists seem to be the only lobby which genuinely frightens Ministers: one has only to remember the great cave-in in Blair's first term when tractors blocked the M6 in protest against a fairly modest rise in duty: duty which has been frozen in most years since. The UK Treasury has still not found a way to fill the revenue gap caused by the increasing number of motorists who no longer buy petrol - further evidence of the fear of electoral punishment by the irate motorist.

But every motorist relies on rail. His morning cornflakes come on a train, as do many of the things he consumes daily. Governments are all agreed that getting lorries off the road is a vital part of reducing carbon emissions; Governments are all agreed that taxing them off the road isn't electorally very clever; Governments are all agreed that the next election - whenever it's due - focuses the mind more than the long term; Governments build roads, not railways.

We should not only encourage our English cousins to look at our attitude towards rail's potential; we should grieve that, despite it, our ability to deliver seems to be diminishing with every month that passes. And by the way, the A9 has not killed a single motorist. Careless motorists have done that.



*Scoop, E. Waugh

NEWS OF DEFIBRILLATORS

At the beginning of October David Simpson, ScotRail's Service Delivery Director, gave us the welcome news that money has been found to install defibrillators at 40 Scottish stations including Thurso and Wick. We hope these will be installed in parts of the stations which are open all hours.

We've asked that the machines will eventually

be installed on trains too, although we may have to wait until the new stock arrives, the 158s being unsuitable.

In the meantime we hope that ScotRail is able to add one or two of our line's more remote stations to the list, since arguably the need for them in such places is even greater than at our northern termini.



DELNY BRIDGE CANCELLED

In November 2023 Network Rail announced that the project to replace the level crossing at Delny with a bridge has been scrapped due to "ballooning construction costs" taking the total to nearly £13m.

The current ABCL (Automatic [full] Barrier Crossing, Locally Monitored) was installed in 2017, replacing the inherently dangerous automatic open crossing which had resulted in several deaths. At the time of installation Network Rail stated that "Level crossings are one of the biggest risks to rail safety and we are committed to removing public crossings from our network where we can, and installing barriers where we cannot." NR had decided to replace the dangerous crossing with a configuration which still required a permanent speed restriction of 55 mph (better than the 35 mph restriction previously in place), rather than the best alternative, which would have allowed trains to pass at the full 65 mph line speed.

According to the Aliona consultants' report of 2016 that was "ruled out of NR policy because of its significantly adverse effect on the economic case for a possible bridge replacement, which would be the infinitely preferable solution." On 24 November a car was hit by a train at Delny LX, fortunately no-one was injured. A timely reminder.

We hope that, now the bridge has been cancelled, the level crossing will be upgraded to allow the faster line speed, since every avenue to speed up the slow service on the Far North Line should be explored.

Another likely by-product of not building a bridge is that Network Rail's objection to the construction of 100 houses in the area would be reinstated. NR had been concerned that such a development would cause additional traffic to use the level crossing.

Ian Budd



A QUESTION OF CAPACITY AND AMBITION



Tesco containers crossing Culloden Viaduct on 11 September 2023. The large bushes on the viaduct should be removed before they threaten the structure.

Photo: Sandy Colley

The message must be got across to the MSPs at Holyrood that tinkering with Highland rail capacity will not be enough to achieve the essential modal shift of freight and passengers to rail.

FREIGHT

Although “Scotland’s Railway” is the new name for the ScotRail-Network Rail Alliance it’s impossible not to wonder if the Scottish Government is thinking only of ScotRail – the passenger railway - when it considers Scotland’s Railway. It seems blind to the pressing needs of the potential freight market.

To achieve Net Zero targets requires getting much more freight carried by rail and reducing the numbers of huge lorries on the roads, especially the main arteries such as the A9. There seems to be a disconnect here between stated Scottish and UK government policy on modal shift and the UK Government’s acceptance of ever larger and more dangerous lorries which are often observed breaking the speed limits.

Can private sector rail haulage companies be persuaded and/or incentivised to expand their businesses to convey a much greater tonnage of all kinds of freight? This could remove many of the HGV journeys from the A9, A96 and A95, and would improve safety as well as benefiting the environment - matching the world imperatives discussed once again at COP 28.

A good tranche of this traffic is for the whisky and timber industries from raw materials in, to finished products heading to the markets further south. Additionally, a new flow is going out to contract in 2024. This is the waste from Inverness’s new consolidation plant which is to go to the rail-connected facility at Dunbar for further processing. Surely the railway must win this contract.

Highland Main Line

The Tesco train from Mossend to Inverness has been a success and has been picking up other traffic too, such as the liquefied natural gas for Thurso and Wick storage which is currently transferred to road at Inverness, and finished Sterling Board timber products from West Fraser (near Inverness Airport) which go south in the grocery containers.

With the new siding connection now enabled for West Fraser at Dalcross, an eventual flow of two

trains per day is envisaged. This and the anticipated waste traffic flow means that further capacity planning on the Highland Main Line is essential.

Network Rail is currently said to be investigating extending some of the HML passing loops. Partly this has been brought about by the need to extend the Tesco train to 24 wagons.

Some of the loops are too short for the train, as can be seen at Pitlochry. The afternoon southbound Tesco trains were often stopped at the end of the double track at Blair Atholl because even at 20 vehicles they were too long to use the Pitlochry loop. It is a matter of great regret that the long Ballinluig loop was taken out of service in 1985, leaving us with a 13 mile single section from Pitlochry to Dunkeld, which for the Tesco train means almost 20 miles after crossing at Blair Atholl.

Far North Line

The A9 north of Dornoch, and particularly from Berriedale North northwards to Latheron and on to Wick on the A99 is not really suitable for HGVs which affect all the other traffic which has to share this road with them. Making more use again of the existing Georgemas Junction rail freight terminal would make sense.

The designation of the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport should give a big opportunity for the railway to handle construction materials and eventually product and raw materials. This will require enhancement at the southern end of the line as far as Invergordon or maybe Nigg station. Restoration of the passing loop provision at the Evanton (Novar) Intermediate Block signal six miles north of Dingwall might be required.

Aberdeen to Inverness (A21)

This route is possibly the biggest contender for expansion of freight amongst all three of the lines which serve the Highlands and Islands node at Inverness.

In view of this, and future enhancement works on the Dundee to Aberdeen and (can't come too soon) Perth to Inverness sections which will cause service disruption, it would make logistical sense to strengthen A21 *now*, to enable it to serve as the diversionary route for Inverness or Aberdeen when their main line is blocked.

Freight contracts are valuable and require/demand daily reliability. The freight must get through by rail if at all possible. We saw when the two long blockages of many weeks occurred in the Carmont area, that in order to get freight through to Aberdeen some passenger trains between Inverness and Elgin had to be cancelled.

It is Elgin and Keith which present the greatest opportunities for rail freight providing transport for raw materials and finished product for the whisky and timber industries. As well as being a major plank in the net zero campaign, transfer of HGV lorry traffic from the A9, A95 and A96 roads to rail will provide a big safety boost by reducing heavy traffic on the three roads, particularly on the A95 from Aviemore to Keith which is too narrow and known for the clashing of HGV wing mirrors.

At the West Fraser (formerly Norbord) site near Inverness Airport Station a connection and signalling for a future siding has now been put in and it only remains for the new operator to build a siding to replace the one Norbord built over to accommodate the first expansion of several extensions to the plant.

PASSENGER SERVICES

Highland Main Line

The HML so badly needs greater flexibility with either more loops or double track to allow the running of not only more freight but more passenger trains too. An hourly frequency of the latter was promised but there are still big two hour gaps southbound from Inverness after the 10:50 and 12:48 and 90 minute gaps after 15:44 and 17:26.

From the December 2023 timetable, the 06:38 Inverness to Edinburgh business train as well as starting six minutes earlier now has 28 minutes of pathing allowances of various sorts between Inverness and Edinburgh Waverley, arriving there at 10:15! The journey used to take 30 minutes less, leaving at 06:50 and arriving at 09:58.

The first northbound service from Edinburgh/Glasgow does not reach Inverness until 10:29, and is followed by arrivals at 12:01 and 13:25. After the 15:29 it is every 90 minutes again until 18:26, after which there is a three hour gap before the 21:24 which is filled by the LNER service from Kings Cross. Finally there are two late arrivals at 22:43 and 23:17.

Far North Line

The Far North Line is also severely compromised by lack of capacity for both freight and passenger trains due to an inadequate number of passing loops. The highly regrettable 'temporary' slow down of 25 minutes to passenger train journey times between Inverness and Wick, in force since 2005, was due to the installation of a GB-wide safety system known as TPWS – Train Protection and Warning System. Safety is all important, but might more have been done to adapt TPWS to our single track lines?

The timetables have been further extended by a minute here and a minute there over the years. For example, the 12:34 from Wick to Inverness now arrives at 17:08, 6 minutes later than in 2019. An overall 4 hours 34 minutes. In 2012 that train took 4 hours 12 minutes and the connection at Inverness enabled arrival in Glasgow 30 minutes sooner. In 2000 the same train was timetabled at 3 hours 48 minutes. That means that 46 minutes has been added to the journey time in the last 24 years, reducing the already slow average speed of 46 mph to a shocking 38.3 mph.

Aberdeen to Inverness (A2I)

In his review of the newly implemented December 2023/24 passenger timetable in *RAIL* magazine 998, Barry Doe is justifiably critical, "Overall service-pattern is a far cry from the original proposals for an hourly regular interval service between Inverness and Aberdeen despite the track improvements in recent years." First Class provision, he says, is "quite unbalanced and quite useless".

The proposals he refers to were made by the First Minister in 2008 along with ones for the Highland Main Line and the parallel A96 and A9 roads. Aspirations for the railway were for completion by 2016 but it and the A96 road targets were subsequently revised to 2030. A good start was made with the Aberdeen to Inverurie redoubling and Forres station enhancement completed in 2019. The recent construction of a passing loop at Inverness Airport Station is another step forward, but there is no sign yet of the construction of a vital loop near Orton to break up the long 18 mile single track bottleneck between Elgin and Keith.

ACTION STATIONS!

We hope the Scottish Government is seriously ambitious about achieving significant modal shift to rail for environmental net zero reasons. The pressing need in the Highlands is for more double tracking to include reinstating quite a few of the passing loops removed by British Rail, lengthening others and maybe adding a few new ones. An effective signalling system is also required to suit the needs of the substantially increased and challenging mix of passenger and freight trains over this combination of double and still some single line sections.

As Scottish Chambers of Commerce (SCC)'s *Sustaining Growth, Supporting Business* campaign press release said in 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."

We urgently need the capacity and the ambition!

Richard Ardern

STRUNG ALONG

Highland Railways Investment - Almost Always "Tomorrow"

www

Background

All three of the railway routes radiating from Inverness were built using capital from shareholders, on the expectation of dividends. It was difficult to raise sufficient funds to build the kind of railways the companies would have preferred. Thus all three lines were built as mostly single track, with quite a few passing places, usually at stations.

The Highland Railway did manage some doubling work, including 6 miles at the Inverness end of the Far North Line and 23 and 11 mile stretches on the Highland Main Line. Most of these were singled in the 1960s, at a time when road transport was seen as the inevitable mode for the future, and the Treasury didn't like spending so much money on (the, by that time, nationalised) railways.

More economies were made in the 1980s as passing loops were removed, leaving the railways with a low capacity, only suitable for infrequent traffic. The one exception to the trend was the reversal of the HML singling of the 23 miles between Blair Atholl and Dalwhinnie, which was redoubled in 1976 on the expectation of North Sea oil related use.

Scotland has inherited Highland railways which are seriously lacking in the capacity and resilience to be able to take up the Scottish Government's planned modal shift of traffic from road to rail.

One would have expected the government to have risen to this challenge, as promised many years ago, and to have started a programme of works to provide the kind of railway needed now.

This simply hasn't happened, instead there are frequently repeated 'background promises' but comparatively little action - nowhere near what is needed.

Adding to the present difficulties, the government has committed to electrifying the Perth-Inverness-Aberdeen triangle. This should be investment on top of the necessary capacity and resilience improvements but the signs are that only electrification is currently being planned.

Every issue of this magazine, and very many public utterances, from newspapers to the Inverness Chamber of Commerce, along with various studies, all carry the same plea - provide a railway in the Highlands suitable for achieving modal shift.

This means double track wherever possible and many more passing loops, so that there is room for more freight and a more intensive, regular, reliable passenger service. Worth mentioning at this point that the parallel roads are all 'double track', i.e. not 'single track with passing places', yet the Scottish Government is inexplicably in the process of committing to spend money on vast road dualling projects (equivalent of a quadruple track railway) instead of rail infrastructure.

Promises

Having said in the printed edition of *Far North Express* that we would give a survey of promises made, it would seem more correct to say that the only actual 'promise' concerning two of the three routes out of Inverness was made by Alex Salmond as First Minister in August 2008.

The closest the FNL has to a promise was the Network Rail announcement at our 2022 AGM & Conference that the Delmore Loop would be operational in 2024.

All other specific mentions of plans for these railways are 'intentions', 'aspirations', 'hopes', 'needs', or whatever you wish to call them.

The source of our frustration is that these intentions exist in the background and are regularly referred to, but are always just out of reach. To make this worse, the Scottish Government celebrates

minor (but useful) achievements, such as the £57m spent on extending two of the existing HML passing loops, as though things are progressing as planned.

Consistently, throughout the period from 2008 to the present, the need for major improvements to these routes has been spelt out by reports, bodies such as Transform Scotland, the media and of course rail campaigners. Unfortunately to no avail, even though both Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon expressed the view publicly that the railway must be able to compete with road journeys in terms of travel time.

Timeline

Here is a selective timeline from 2008 to the present:

- **2008** - Alex Salmond promise in Inverness: reduction of the journey time between Inverness and Edinburgh to an average of 3 hours, with a quickest service taking no more than 2 hr 45 mins by 2012.
- **2008** - Publication of the first *Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR)*: specific HML and A21 'objectives', both in two "phases". HML: A reduction in journey times of approximately 35 minutes, resulting in Edinburgh to Inverness journeys of under three hours, with similar reductions for services to Glasgow. A21: Reduction of full-length journey time to 2 hr or less. Minimum hourly frequency between Aberdeen and Inverness, with two trains per hour on the Nairn to Inverness section. Double tracking at both ends.
- **2011** - Scottish Government *Infrastructure Investment Plan*: stated that the "Highland Main Line Rail Improvement project" would be completed in phases between 2014 and 2025.
- **2012** - Transport Scotland: "Phase one of the project was delivered in December 2012, which increased services from nine to 11 trains per day and reduced journey times by an average of six minutes (and on some services by up to 18 minutes) at a cost of £1.2 million." **In fact only one service was 18 minutes quicker.**
- **2015** - *Delivering the Goods*, Transport Scotland: "Developing the rail network capability north of the central belt also remains a priority, particularly on the Highland Main Line between Perth and Inverness, and the other intercity routes to Aberdeen. Investment to 2019 will support some additional increased double tracking between Aberdeen and Inverness whilst a combination of some double track sections and longer passing loops on single line sections are expected to be delivered on the Highland Main Line. Substantial improvements to these key intercity routes, including additional gauge clearance and capacity to operate longer length trains, will continue beyond 2019 in line with the Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR) recommendations and options identified through the industry's long-term planning process. Taken together with a focus on considering making available freight paths to better align with customers' needs, these improvements will help provide the scope for the rail freight market share to increase through the carriage of more intermodal traffic as well as key Highland exports such as whisky and timber."
- **2016** - *Network Rail Scotland Route Study*: Committed rail scheme - Highland Main Line Phase 2. FNL options also listed, including replacement of RETB with conventional signalling on the busier section between Inverness and Dingwall, and installation of double track in the section between Dingwall and Invergordon.
- **2019** - Network Rail: "The number of trains between Inverness and the Central Belt will have increased from 11 in each direction at the start of the project to 15 in 2019 – almost a 40% increase." **In 2024 there are 11 northbound and 12 southbound services.**
- **2019** - Transport Scotland: "Phase two of the £57 million project was completed (infrastructure ready for use) on 25 March 2019, on time and under budget." **It was only under budget because the original specification was reduced, resulting in insufficient loop length for some freight**

trains.

- **2019** - Phase 1 of Aberdeen to Inverness rail improvements completed in December. Forres station was relocated and a new passing loop incorporated. This is the one major investment in Highland railways so far, but only goes part of the way towards fulfilling STPR's remit.
- **2020** - Kintore Station opened.
- **2022** - FoFNL AGM & Conference: "The Delmore Loop will be operational in 2024" - Network Rail.
- **2022** - STPR2, December: "(STPR2) recommends a programme of enhancements, including new and longer passing loops with more flexibility, and permissible speed increases. This would achieve improvements to journey times and increases in capacity and reliability for passenger and freight services."
- Under "Options Sifted In for Further Consideration" there was quite a long list of potential improvements for the Far North Line. **We must remember that STPR2 contains only recommendations, no promises.**
- **2023** - Inverness Airport Station opened, including a loop and provision for a siding to the West Fraser factory.
- **2023** - Parliamentary Answer in March: "Transport Scotland, alongside industry partners, is exploring options for lengthening passing loops on the line to enable longer and more frequent freight and passenger services." "We will fund the infrastructure enhancements necessary to produce further journey time savings on the Highland Main Line once a robust business case* has been established for this expenditure."
- **2024** - Transport Scotland website: "Upgrading the Highland Main Line is one of the Scottish Government's key priorities. The long-term goal of the project seeks to achieve a fastest journey time of 2 hours 45 minutes between Inverness and the Central Belt with an average journey time of 3 hours and an hourly service by 2025."

*Implicit in the term 'business case' is cost per resident. This puts the Highlands at a great disadvantage. A better term might be 'strategic case' since all transport projects potentially benefit everyone, no matter where they live, including visitors and tourists.

Conclusion

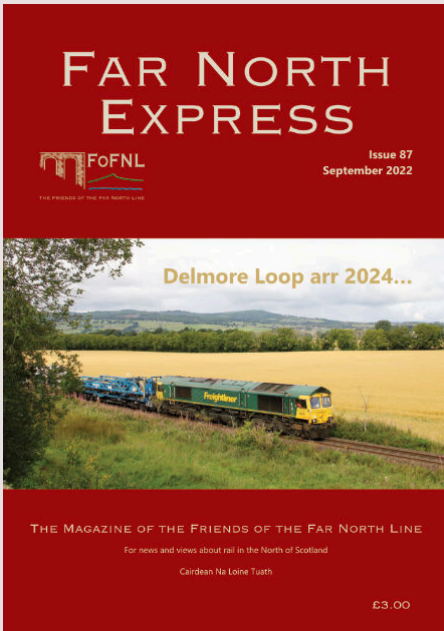
Quite simply, the Scottish Government, although being continuously advised about what is necessary for rail in the Highlands, has not got to grips with the issues. This needs to change.

Ian Budd

VIEW FROM THE SOAPBOX

A 2015 BBC article began, "Speakers' Corner in London is well known as the home of free speech, where anyone can get on their soapbox and make their voice heard. Whether anyone will listen is of course another matter."

In issue after issue of *Far North Express*, and in meeting after meeting with Transport Scotland and various MSPs, we patiently point out that Scottish Government 'policy' (use of inverted commas here is no accident) does not chime with Scottish Government action.



With a quick flick through past issues we find that the Head of Sponsorship at Network Rail "...was indeed the bringer of good news as he was able to announce confirmation that detailed planning work for the new passing loop near Inverness has begun, with it being brought into use in 2024." with this comment on a later page, "That it will have taken nearly 20 years to get this capacity improvement made is highly regrettable." And in the same article, "Both First Ministers since 2008 have said, 'Railways must compete with roads'." Those were written in 2022. *[A decision about the installation of the Delmore Loop has been postponed again until the end of March this year, with the responsibility being placed on Network Rail for not having completed the detailed planning work.]*

A year later we find, "Here we are 18 years since campaigning began and four years since the basic decision was made, and the latest news is that Network Rail is still working up an outline design and costs for the loop which will be submitted to Transport Scotland in the middle of the year [2023] for authority and funding for construction."

Those quotes concern 'our' railway, the FNL, but in the May 2023 issue of *FNE* we are talking as usual about how dualling the A9 seems to overshadow all talk of vital rail improvements. As I write this there is still absolutely no definite news about the Highland Main Line, other than the fact that it needs to be electrified soon.

Perhaps it's very convenient for the government to require a "robust business case" for infrastructure projects. These can be happily breached by introducing spurious justifications such as the "Driver Frustration Benefit" element with a value of £429m, 23% of the total budgeted cost of A9 dualling in 2016, when it's politically convenient - i.e. not if it's for rail projects.

It's hardly surprising that we can relate to the individuals haranguing uninterested passers-by from their Hyde Park Corner soapboxes. Rail improvement in the Highlands is being completely drowned out by those who shout louder than we can.

We will continue to make our case with determination, politeness and accuracy.

Ian Budd

ROAD TO RUIN

www

The A9 debate seems to be over for the time being, now we wonder where that leaves rail investment and Scottish Government policy.

This saga has a direct effect on the outlook for significant investment on the Far North Line, as well as our 'feeder' lines to Perth and Aberdeen, hence the need to cover the topic here.

As rail campaigners we've watched the A9 campaign unfold with a feeling of helplessness. Led by Fergus Ewing MSP, members of the public who've suffered bereavement, and several Scottish newspapers, emotional pressure was used to force the issue, implying pretty directly that the Scottish Government would have blood on its hands if it didn't keep its promise to complete the dualling of the remainder of the A9 between Inverness and Perth.

As Pandora notes elsewhere in this issue, *"The A9 has not killed a single motorist. Careless motorists have done that."*

A9 campaigners have not worried about factual accuracy, stating that:

- the A9 is the most dangerous road in Scotland
- a dual carriageway has no right turns
- a dual carriageway has no junctions coming on to the road

and they have ignored alternative road improvements which would be far cheaper:

- converting the single carriageway sections to the 'Swedish' 2+1 alternating system, with a continuous fixed barrier to eliminate head-on crashes and long sections of two lanes for overtaking
- installing grade separated junctions
- using the LILO (left in, left out) system combined with roundabouts for lesser roads

For the record it's worth noting that the only logical way to assess a road's danger level is to count accidents per car miles travelled. According to the DfT, using this measure, only three Scottish roads are in the UK top 50 for danger - the A82, A7 and A71. The A68 which is in both England and Scotland is also in the top 50.

The A9 dualling campaign was a test of the Scottish Government's resolve to uphold its own policy, which is modal shift of freight and passengers to rail and a 20% reduction in car kilometres.

The government has failed this first major test spectacularly and the Scottish budget is now saddled with a huge avoidable expense which will inevitably curtail the necessary investment in the railway.

According to *The Herald*, "Newly released Scottish cabinet papers show then finance secretary John Swinney shared doubts about the project with Alex Salmond and other senior colleagues in August 2008". Mr Swinney characterised the project as "hugely expensive", and at a possible cost in excess of £5000m for the A9, it is hard to see how the Scottish Government has felt able to commit to completion by 2035. Given the fact that Scotland is unable to raise money by borrowing as other countries do, the budget clearly won't stretch far enough for this, a fact borne out by the recent depressing annual Scottish Budget statement.

Perhaps the 2035 promise is being made by the present occupants of ministerial posts in the silent hope that their successors will be brave enough to state the obvious to the Scottish voters and redirect what money there is to some sensible, but far cheaper, interventions on the A9, and to tackling the rail infrastructure deficit properly. So far in recent years the government has been quick

to point out that money *has* been spent on the Highland Main Line, unfortunately the figure was only £57m - this gives some idea of the discrepancy between the government's Highland aspirations for rail and for road.

At this decisive moment what we needed from our politicians was vision and consensus, what we saw instead was party political point-scoring in debates and in the media. Given that all parties in Scotland vocally support the notion that climate change can be addressed by modal shift to rail, this is disappointing to say the least.

Meanwhile, the Scottish newspapers came down firmly on the side of road improvements when they knew very well that they should have been campaigning for rail investment. Sadly both newspapers and politicians seem to place their fear of public opinion over their duty.

However the same newspapers *have* salvaged some credibility by publishing letters giving other views on road spending. Here are three:

Growth of railway network must replace planned dualling of A96 and A9

Rhodri Griffiths, Alford.

Press and Journal (Inverness, Highlands, and Islands)

27 Oct 2023

Sir, – I would like to congratulate The Press and Journal (October 18) on its fair and balanced coverage of the A96 (and A9) dualling debate at the recent SNP autumn conference.

I recognise my opposition to further dualling is at odds with the view of many people in the area, but times have changed a great deal since the policy was floated in the SNP's Grampian region manifesto in 1990.

Back in those days, global warming was recognised as a threat but the devastating reality of mass species extinction and climate catastrophe we now face should really cause local politicians and planners to pause and take stock before resorting to the outdated and ineffective policy of yet more road building.

It's been proven over and over again that more road building does not ease congestion – it actually encourages more and more traffic on to already overcrowded roads.

Huntly and Inverurie are already bypassed. Presumably the dualling enthusiasts are also planning to bypass Keith, Elgin, Forres and Nairn. Will these towns actually benefit?

How much more countryside will need to be buried under tarmac in order to achieve this goal? Are the already dualled sections of the A96 inherently safer? Are they less prone to being closed as a result of serious accidents? Is Huntly a more prosperous town since it was bypassed?

Above all, is it really worth spending countless millions on such an environmentally unwise project in order to save a few minutes off the journey time from Aberdeen to Inverness?

Surely it makes far more sense to invest transport infrastructure funding in public transport, and particularly into improving the rail network.

On a recent midweek train journey from Inverness to Edinburgh, I was taken aback by the number of passengers on the train; scarcely a free seat in all three carriages and a similar level of passenger take-up on the Aberdeen to Edinburgh stage of the journey. This popularity is in spite of hefty prices.

Dualling the railway line between Inverness and Aberdeen would allow for provision of more frequent trains, enabling people to travel in comfort from one city centre to the other or indeed to any of the smaller communities along the line. It would also facilitate the transportation of more freight by rail, thereby getting rid of at least some of the juggernauts churning out diesel fumes and

putting lives at risk.

It goes without saying we should be reopening many of the railway lines closed in the Beeching era. The Aberdeen to Peterhead and Fraserburgh line is already envisaged and should be followed by many more.

Of course the Beeching era was the "golden age" of motorway building.

Surely by now we should have learned from the disastrous mistakes of the early 1960s and be preparing to promote and invest in cleaner, safer and sustainable means of getting from A to B.

I'm a bit disappointed that more local SNP members don't currently share this view but, on the other hand, very pleased that the party is open, honest and democratic enough to permit a healthy debate about the future of transport infrastructure in Scotland.

Go for the Swedish option

Ian Budd, Bishopbriggs

The Herald on Sunday

5 Nov 2023

[In response to "Out of road 'The people of Scotland want tarmac, not talk'" by Fergus Ewing MSP]

It is very interesting that Fergus Ewing's opinion piece does not mention the far cheaper Swedish 2+1 with wire rope median system when referring to the need to avoid head-on collisions. This design has one continuous lane in each direction, and a middle lane changing direction every few kilometres, with a median barrier separating the two traffic directions. Head-on crashes are eliminated. It will mostly fit into the present single carriageway road space. This, combined with grade-separated junctions, would avoid very many accidents.

Our transport budget is limited, and much of it will be required to achieve the modal shift from road to rail which is Scottish Government policy. It's hard to understand why this solution is not already being seriously considered. Let's hope this changes soon.

North rail network needs investment

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

Press and Journal (Inverness, Highlands, and Islands)

15 Nov 2023

[In response to a strange article which compared the percentages of A-roads which are dual carriageway by Scottish area, unsurprisingly showing that the areas with the least population have the lowest figure.]

Sir, - Today's headline "Anger as north worst in UK for lack of dualling" could have been written with railways in mind.

At a time when it is Scottish Government policy to reduce car use in Scotland by 20% by 2030, which is estimated to double rail passenger figures, it is very noticeable that most Highland railways are single track, including all the routes out of the city of Inverness. Single track railways are the equivalent of single track roads, i.e. vehicles can only pass each other at passing places ("loops"). In the 1980s, when it was thought by some that railways were no longer needed, many of the already few loops were removed. In some parts of the Highlands there are up to 24 miles between them. Government policy is also to see a major shift of road freight to rail.

It would be very helpful if the *Press & Journal* were to campaign as vociferously for the essential

investment in Highland railways as it does for roads, for which there is an infinitely weaker case.

Newspapers have campaigned in the past for rail investment. Here is an editorial from the *Inverness Courier*, 6 December 2016 which is just as relevant now:

Second class service is right off track

It's hard to imagine that anyone who regularly takes the train to and from Inverness would be surprised by the *Courier's* revelation today that train times are becoming progressively slower between the Highland capital and the Central Belt.

The reality is that the times aren't just slower but the trains run late far too often, are overcrowded and too many times replaced by bus services between Inverness and Perth due to engineering works.

It was eight years ago that the Scottish Government pledged to make the route a top transport priority.

But a recent report by Reform Scotland found that under current proposals, over the next 30 years journey times will be faster from Glasgow to London than from Glasgow to Inverness which is less than half the distance!

That is simply unacceptable. It's not as if the road and air links from Inverness are fantastic and it's just the latest example of the people of the Highlands getting shabby treatment when compared with the rest of Scotland.

Pressure needs to be put on the government to fix this, so it would be nice to see the local councillors, MSPs and MPs taking up the cudgels in the corridors of power.

Campaigners rightly fear that although the upgrade of the Highland Main Line was the government's third transport priority in 2008 - after the Queensferry road bridge and the Edinburgh to Glasgow rail improvement programme - it is slipping way behind.

The aim is to slash journey times to 2 hours 45 minutes with an hourly service by 2025. But the vital 06:50 train from Inverness to Edinburgh will be six minutes slower than it already is from next month, taking 3 hours 18 minutes.

For embattled Highland travellers that is simply adding insult to injury and there are no signs of things improving any time soon.

[A Friends of the Far North Line] rail campaigner...hit the nail on the head. "It just seems the government is not putting the money north - we are just getting left behind. We are going to end up with a two-tier railway system in Scotland."

People reading this and using the service heading north from Inverness are getting even shoddier treatment.

Surely it can't be because the vast majority of voters live in the Central Belt - or could it! [*Inverness Courier* 6 Dec 2016]

On 9 August the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee launched a consultation to "look at the commitment to dual the A9 and address the on-going safety concerns on the road". The consultation followed a petition submitted by road safety campaigner Laura Hansler, which urged the Scottish Government to fulfil its 2011 promise to fully dual the A9. The committee promised to produce a summary of the feedback it received which is available at <https://www.parliament.scot/get-involved/petitions/view-petitions/pe1992-dual-the-a9-and-improve-road-safety> as part of the committee's consideration of the petition which at 2 January 2024 is not yet completed.

FoFNL contributed to Transform Scotland's written response which is available on our website and can be accessed from this issue's companion page <https://www.fofnl.org.uk/fne91.php>.

The ongoing debate about Scottish Government transport priorities received a major intervention by Reform Scotland, the independent Scottish think tank on 28 December 2023:

Lack of Ambition for Scotland’s Rail Network “Economically, Environmentally and Socially Damaging”

Reform Scotland calls for new Scottish Rail Infrastructure Commission

Reform Scotland today publishes a paper calling on the Scottish Government to set up a **Scottish Rail Infrastructure Commission** to assess the economic, environmental and social case for improving Scotland’s rail infrastructure.

Releasing detailed travel times for journeys in Scotland in its new paper **Getting on Track**, the think tank reveals a huge number of journeys which are significantly faster by car than they are by train, including:

- Edinburgh to Inverness, which takes over 3hrs 30mins by train and only around 3hrs by car
- Glasgow to Dunfermline, which takes over 1hr 30mins by train, with a change, but just under an hour by car
- Aberdeen to Dumfries, which is over 4hrs 30mins by train, with two changes, and under 4hrs by car

The paper also shows that while travelling from London to Edinburgh can take as little as 4 hours by train, it can take almost as long again to reach Inverness from the Central Belt.

Commenting, Reform Scotland’s Research Director **Alison Payne** said:

“The Scottish Government deserves credit for having in place a rolling programme of investment in upgrading railway lines, which is expensive and takes a great deal of time and planning. However we have to ask whether these incremental changes are enough.

“We rarely think big enough, or long-term enough, yet on rail infrastructure we must.

“Scotland’s rail network has the potential to help address some of the medium- to long-term challenges facing the nation, such as achieving net zero, reducing depopulation and growing the economy. But that potential can only be realised through the sort of ambitious thinking of which we presently see far too little.”

The link to the full paper is in our companion page and we would urge everyone to take the time to read this through with an open mind - *especially if you are an MSP.*

Approached for a reaction to *Getting on Track*, **Colin Marr**, Chief Executive of the Inverness Chamber of Commerce had this to say:

*“I welcome the publication of *Getting on Track* from Reform Scotland.*

“It clearly compares the driving times and rail times between Scotland’s major cities and ports. It reinforces the well accepted argument that to encourage less private car and road freight use we need rail times to be significantly less than drive times and it then clearly shows that this is currently only true for a few of our Central Belt and larger cities and that it is not the case for the majority of Scotland’s land mass. It also shows the stark contrast in journey times between London and Edinburgh and then Edinburgh to Inverness.

“We support their call for a Scottish Rail Infrastructure Commission but would have liked to see a suggested timetable for its formation and reporting. We would also have liked to see the report discuss rail travel within the Highlands. Scotland doesn’t stop at Inverness – it is vital that a future rail commission looks at journey times and the need for rail investment within the Highlands. Modern rail

infrastructure would undoubtedly help with business investment and the current problem of depopulation across our region."

Our sense of frustration about rail in the Highlands being sidelined is magnified by the virtual secrecy which surrounds progress on rail investment. A search through the Transport Scotland 'Projects' section leads to a very out-of-date page for each of the three railways. For the HML, completion in 2025 of some modest journey time reductions is described as the "long-term goal of the Highland Mainline enhancements programme" [there is no sign of it happening] and the link to Network Rail's HML page takes you to an apology that "*the page you are trying to view does not exist*". The same thing happens on the page about Inverness-Aberdeen. The "forthcoming" STPR2 which came out in January 2022 is also mentioned. The Far North Line page still refers to the "Lentran Loop", even though that has been replaced by the proposed "Delmore Loop" of which there is still no news except that NR's cost submission (originally by the summer of 2023) has twice been delayed, currently expected by the end of March 2024.

The feeling that this government is not serious about rail is inescapable.

Ian Budd & Mike Lunan (present and previous Conveners)

This is an appropriate place to squeeze in a mention of **Stewart Nicol**, Colin Marr's predecessor at the Inverness Chamber of Commerce. Stewart received an OBE in the 2024 King's New Year's Honours List for services to the Highlands' economy. He has always been a vocal supporter of our campaigning, recognising the need for excellent rail services radiating from Inverness.

HS2 BEHEADED

www

At the Tory Party Conference at the beginning of October Rishi Sunak killed off the remaining extensions to HS2, leaving just the Old Oak Common to Birmingham section which is already partly built.

As Maggie Simpson, Director General of the Rail Freight Group writes: "Sunak described how the scheme no longer met the needs of the country, and proposed a string of alternative transport schemes that will be pursued in its place. However, and most critically, he also stated that HS2 trains would still serve Manchester, Liverpool and Scotland from Euston, running on the conventional network north of Birmingham. Although the details are far from clear, the prospect of new HS2 trains on the congested section through the Trent Valley and on the routes to Manchester raises real concerns over future freight capacity and the ability to grow freight.

"For those of us in the rail freight community, the promise of HS2 was not so much about faster journeys but more about increased capacity. Moving passenger trains onto the HS2 infrastructure would free up paths on the West Coast Main Line (WCML) - paths which could then be used by freight trains. The government has recognised that moving freight from road to rail is an important strategy in meeting Net Zero targets, but this decision has made growing rail freight volumes much more difficult."

The news is no better for passengers - once the new line is built, services to the North of England and Scotland will be provided by new non-tilting high-speed trains, which will unfortunately be limited to slower speeds than the Pendolinos on the winding sections of route in Northern England and Scotland - resulting in longer journey times than at present.

It's impossible to fathom either the UK's or the Scottish Government's current transport policy. The Conservatives down south seem to be spooked by the unwelcome reception environmental policies, such as extensions of ULEZ, receive in some quarters, and up here things don't look much better with the government looking over its shoulder all the time at the roads lobby.

Ian Budd

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Question S6W-22543: Paul Sweeney, MSP for Glasgow, Scottish Labour, answered on 10 November 2023

To ask the Scottish Government what it (a) has done and (b) is doing to reduce the cost per single track kilometre (STK) of railway electrification.

Fiona Hyslop: In our Control Period 6 (2019 – 2024) through our High Level Output Statement (HLOS) we tasked Network Rail with development of an efficient electrification technical specification optimised for Scotland, in order to deliver an efficient and affordable rolling programme of electrification, with appropriate plant, staff and resources based in Scotland. We have built on this on our Control Period 7 HLOS with a requirement placed on to Network Rail to continue to deliver and further develop the efficient electrification technical specification agreed across Team Scotland (Network Rail, Transport Scotland and ScotRail).

With all rail infrastructure works, including railway electrification, Transport Scotland's officials actively engage with Network Rail and rail industry partners to seek ways to reduce the cost of construction.

For example, Transport Scotland participates in Network Rail Scotland's Decarbonisation Innovation workstream. This workstream aligns with Network Rail's Efficient Electrification work with the goal of enabling cost and time savings for electrification schemes as well as identifying process and safety improvements.

Transport Scotland has maintained a rolling programme of electrification work, unlike elsewhere in Great Britain, as reflected in current work on Barrhead and then East Kilbride to ensure learning curve benefits are consolidated.

Question S6W-21986: Liam Kerr, MSP for North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 17 November 2023

To ask the Scottish Government whether the conclusions of the Audit Scotland report, Investing in Scotland's infrastructure, and, in particular, the stated change in status of the Borders railway decarbonisation project to "Paused", alter the status of the Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan's objective to electrify the Edinburgh to Dundee and Aberdeen mainline by 2035, and whether it can confirm that the Edinburgh to Dundee and Aberdeen mainline will be fully electrified by 2035, as committed to in the Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan.

Fiona Hyslop: The objectives in the July 2020 Rail services Decarbonisation Action Plan DAP currently remain. Any updates will be included in the refreshed plan, which is under development, and is due to be published in the near future.

[This answer was also given on 7 December in response to S6W-23297, asked by Rhoda Grant MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, regarding the inclusion of the FNL, HML, Kyle, West Highland and Inverness-Aberdeen lines in the refreshed plan.

Question S6W-23935: Paul Sweeney, MSP for Glasgow, Scottish Labour, answer expected on 15 January 2024

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will revise the Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG) model for future rail infrastructure investment, in light of patronage projections for the reopening of Stow, Galashiels and Tweedbank stations on the Borders Railway reportedly having been underestimated for the first year of opening by, respectively, 313%, 330% and 681%.

STATION USAGE FIGURES

Every year the Office for Rail and Road (ORR) produces statistics for station usage based on ticket sales. They cover 1 April to 31 March each year. The 2022-23 figures were published on 14 December 2023 and are for the first complete year without any Covid restrictions or advisories since the pandemic began.

This table is in a slightly different format from recent years in that the usual "Two Year Change" column has been replaced by "Change Since 2019-20". This gives a more useful indication of post-Covid recovery. Although in general the FNL is recovering well, it has a fair way to go before reaching the levels seen in the middle of the last decade.

Despite the many entries in red in the final column, the Far North Line station usage figures are mostly showing an improvement over the previous year, with with the exception of Brora, Golspie and Rogart. Interestingly, three request stops, Altnabreac, Dunrobin Castle and Invershin, have seen a significant increase since before Covid. These outliers may give ScotRail planners some useful clues about passengers' travel habits.

	2019-20	2021-22	2022-23	One Year Change	Change Since 2019-20
Wick	16664	12980	14,924	14.98%	-10.44%
Thurso	39702	25200	31,446	24.79%	-20.79%
Georgemas Junction	1570	1032	1,318	27.71%	-16.05%
Scotscaider	232	116	124	6.90%	-46.55%
Altnabreac	232	230	280	21.74%	20.69%
Forsinard	2866	660	936	41.82%	-67.34%
Kinbrace	456	370	436	17.84%	-4.39%
Kildonan	214	140	148	5.71%	-30.84%
Helmsdale	5086	3168	3,484	9.97%	-31.50%
Brora	6354	4722	4,594	-2.71%	-27.70%
Dunrobin Castle	1240	770	1,428	85.45%	15.16%
Golspie	5586	4536	4,056	-10.58%	-27.39%
Rogart	1656	992	884	-10.89%	-46.62%
Lairg	6264	2960	3,348	13.11%	-46.55%
Invershin	216	210	232	10.48%	7.41%
Culrain	312	164	304	85.37%	-2.56%
Ardgay	6408	3968	4,412	11.19%	-31.15%
Tain	28036	19664	19,606	-0.29%	-30.07%
Fearn	4182	2980	3,754	25.97%	-10.23%
Invergordon	27826	13308	18,758	40.95%	-32.59%
Alness	27050	15810	16,804	6.29%	-37.88%
Dingwall	80154	46524	55,536	19.37%	-30.71%
Conon Bridge	18022	9212	10,898	18.30%	-39.53%
Muir Of Ord	70850	41230	47,688	15.66%	-32.69%
Beauly	46510	30178	36,588	21.24%	-21.33%
Inverness	1214648	753228	974,808	29.42%	-19.75%
Total (excluding Inverness)	397688	241124	281986	16.95%	-29.09%

NOTES FROM THE FAR NORTH LINE

FoFNL member Ian Watson spent a week on the Far North Line in October. He made various notes about his experiences including trying to understand the vagaries of the Customer Information Screens (CIS). Photos by Ian Watson.

Use of Request-Stop Buttons

On Monday 16 October I was at Culrain wishing to board the 18:44 train to Tain. The display advised that the train was 23 minutes late, expected at 19:07 (the old system advised that it was expected at 18:44, but next day I observed that that was now blank). I pressed the button. By memory I got a message that the advice was valid for 20 minutes. Certainly at the end of 20 minutes the display started flashing, and I pressed

the button a second time and was given the message that the driver had been advised. So, if a train is more than 20 minutes late, you have to press the button twice.



Situation at Altnabreac

On Tuesday 17 October I went to Altnabreac, and from there walked to Loch Dhu. It was a gloriously sunny day, and warm! While on the walk I met a man on a quad-bike, and we had a long conversation. It turned out the man was the owner of Lochdhu Lodge (formerly a hotel). As well as owning the big house, he also owned three cottages on the south side of Sleach Water. At one time his wife (now his ex-wife) owned the house at the station, but she sold the house to what he classed

as "difficult people". He went on to tell me that recently [actually in March] a "cavalcade of vans" came to install a request-stop kiosk on Altnabreac station. However the residents of the station house objected and quoted passages from The Bible at the contractors, who then left without doing any work, and thus hand signals to the driver are still necessary. He warned me that when I went back to the station I should have no contact with them. When I did go back to the station to catch the 13:34 train they were chopping wood, and the man remarked about the fine weather.



Work at Lairg

On passing through Lairg I noticed that the oil storage tanks have gone, and also all the associated pipework. However contractors were building some new installation which appears to be using a rail track: a facility for timber?



On-going Problem With CIS System

One day I was going on the 11:10 train to Inverness. The screen said "Expt 11:14". But at 11:10 the screen immediately changed to information about the next train at 15:46. Some women standing by looked very puzzled and said "Does that mean that the train has been cancelled?". For irregular users of trains this situation is very confusing. ScotRail really needs to do something about this.

Experiences on Thursday 19, Friday 20 and Saturday 21 October

On Thursday & Friday all services terminated and started at Tain. The reason, I was told, was the causeway before Ardgay, where in the past during high winds trains had been covered with sea water. Trains ran from Tain at 06:30, 06:59, 09:23, 11:10, 15:46, etc. However while the trains ran (I travelled on the 09:23 ex Tain on the Friday) the CIS displayed the trains, but said they were cancelled. This applied to all the stations before Dingwall. So nobody got on at Invergordon and Alness. I was one of three who had boarded at Tain. But mysteriously the trains correctly appeared on CIS at Dingwall, Conon Bridge etc and people boarded. I came back on the 17:12, and the same thing happened. Once past Dingwall the train was given as cancelled. So I have now travelled twice on a cancelled train! Incidentally trains to Kyle ran on the Friday.

I was due to go home on Saturday 21 October (originally on Friday, but no trains south or east beyond Aviemore/Elgin). On Friday the ScotRail App said that I could go home on Saturday, but with a RRB (rail replacement bus) from Tain at 09:03. On Friday/Saturday night there was a deluge, and the RRBs were cancelled (the ScotRail App now told me I could go home with a RRB on Sunday). However Stagecoach did not cancel their buses. So I caught the No 25 from Tain P.O. at 09:33 and got to Inverness where I found that the 12:45 train to Edinburgh was running. But that Stagecoach bus journey was incredible – the young woman driver charged along; it was more like being on a boat – until Evanton waves more or less continuously overwhelmed the bus. So perhaps you could understand ScotRail cancelling their RRBs – but thankfully for me Stagecoach kept going. The bus fare was £12.00 – almost worth it for the entertainment value!

Ian Watson

NOT AS EASY AT ABC

A long-running dispute about the ownership of Altnabreac Station (ABC) platform and track, and access for maintenance and development came to a head in the Autumn. The station is around six miles from the nearest public road and accessed only by rough vehicle tracks.

The background to the current situation is that maintenance vehicles cannot access the station without crossing ground belonging to the old station building, which has been a private house for several decades. The overall landowners of the area around the station have never had a problem with allowing access to the railway, but in recent years the current owners of the house, along with the previous owner, who still holds some adjacent land, have been stating that they own parts of the railway property, including the station platform.

ScotRail called an online meeting on 6 November, including FoFNL as stakeholders, to inform us that it was about to issue a press statement announcing the temporary closure of the station due to railway staff being unable to gain access, even for essential safety work.

The announcement triggered several newspaper articles - notably an investigation by The Times which had coincidentally been on the verge of carrying a feature about the Far North Line when the story broke.



John Thurso MP, FoFNL President when this photo was taken in 2016, flags down a northbound train at Altnabreac with a pair of Eurotunnel umbrellas!

Very few people live at Altnabreac, and the news coverage unearthed much about the colourful characters to be found there, most of which is readily available online for anyone interested. Such research will reveal an interesting and illuminating history which probably sheds much light on recent events. The main characters involved are the current owners of the station house and the previous owner, along with the owner of nearby Lochdhu Lodge.

The shocking aspect of the story is that recent attempts to access the station, for example to install the request-stop kiosk in March, have been met with verbal intimidation and threats from both the current and previous owners of the station house. Fortunately there are no reports of any intimidation of passengers using the station.

A full meeting for further discussion was held in Inverness on 27 November to agree a way forward. The ownership dispute is completely baseless - individuals cannot own station platforms or track. The various organisations involved are not prepared to put their staff in harm's way, so a legal solution which can be enforced by British Transport Police will be pursued, after a final attempt to persuade the owners of the station house to see reason.

There is no question of the station being permanently closed; although it is little used it is seen as a valuable part of the railway's purpose of enabling access for walkers and cyclists to a unique part of Scotland. As a Transport Scotland official said, "We don't close railway stations."

Ian Budd

BIKE STANDS LOTTERY

If you're thinking of cycling to Thurso or Wick station and leaving your bike locked up safely until you return you have to be very careful.

Imagine you decide to cycle to your station, leave your bike there and collect it upon your return. You've looked up your train using the timetable on the ScotRail website and noticed the station facilities listed there which tell you that there are 10 sheltered cycle storage spaces at each station. You've also noticed that both stations are fully staffed so buying your ticket won't be a problem.

You arrive in the morning with your bike and discover that the ticket office is shut until after both morning trains have left. There is a helpful notice telling you that. Anyway, you'll still be able to purchase your ticket on the train, so now you need to lock up your bike. This is when you discover that the 10 storage spaces are *inside* the station building. If you'd known that the station is not fully staffed as the timetable says, but part-time, you'd have looked up the opening times which are found in a totally different section of the website. There you would have discovered that if you want to leave your bike behind you have to be using one of the two afternoon trains, and making sure you're returning on a train no later than the 10:41 ex-Inverness on a later day, but not a Sunday, as the station building is locked all day.

By this time you're probably wondering if anyone ever uses the cycle storage.

Anyone caught out like this may have to either abandon their journey or hope that they can take their bike on the train, even though they haven't booked it in either direction. This may well cause capacity problems on the train when other cyclists have already booked spaces.

Even if a prospective traveller knows the ticket office opening times, they may still be caught out on arrival at their station when they find a notice informing them that the ticket office is closed due to operational issues. They won't be able to retrieve their bike until the next time the ticket office is open.

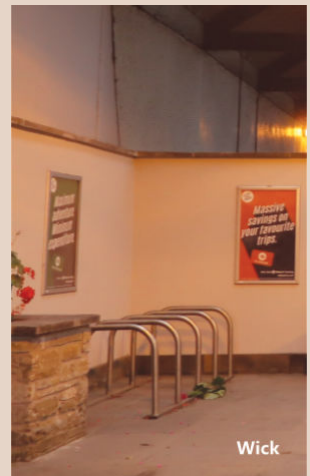
When approached about this whole question, ScotRail's response was:

A cycle facility programme of work is due to start which will see the cycle racks replaced with a new style, and these can be relocated outwith the booking office area to a more suitable location.

Research and photos by Neil Wallace



Thurso



Wick

DUNFERMLINE CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE



On 30 November I spent a very interesting morning visiting ScotRail's Customer Service Centre which is located in Dunfermline City Station.

My host was Steve Friend, the Centre Manager, who enthusiastically talked me through the work carried out in this, the smaller of two such Service Centres. The other is in Paisley Gilmour Street Station.

The two centres cover all the stations in Scotland between them. Paisley keeps an eye and ear on the western Central Belt area, which includes Scotland's biggest and busiest concentration of stations. Meanwhile the Dunfermline facility looks after everything else, which although mostly the east and north of Scotland also includes the West Highland Line and some of the smaller stations on the Glasgow & South Western route to Dumfries and Carlisle.

When you press a Help button on the Far North Line it is an operator in Dunfermline who will answer. If you walk into a station on the line you will be monitored by the CCTV in Dunfermline, and if you hear a special announcement, this is where it comes from.

There is evidently a marked difference between the kind of interactions the centre staff have with the public in the two centres; Paisley is often contacted with the kind of immediate train information requests you would expect, whereas Dunfermline, whilst also receiving plenty of those, is often asked for help by visitors and tourists looking for information beyond the latest train service advice.

The amount of relevant information quickly accessible by the staff at their desks is extremely valuable to someone who has become stuck, puzzled, or baffled, at a railway station. Perhaps the best way to imagine this is that it gives the traveller quick access to the kind of information they could get at home on the internet. The major difference being that a staff member in the centre knows exactly how to find local bus times, bus stop locations, taxi firms and even local visitor attractions in seconds - because that's what they're doing all day.

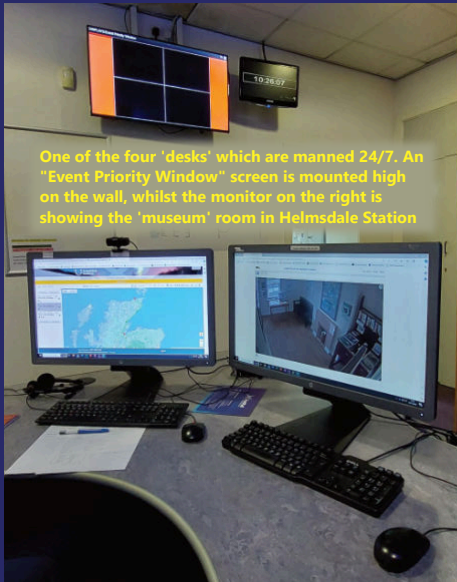
As a theoretical question, I asked Steve whether, if I were a tourist who had got off the train at Tain and were wishing to visit the Glenmorangie Distillery, there would be advice available at the Help Point about how to get there. He said that is exactly the kind of request they sometimes receive, and they would help. I wouldn't want to give the reader the impression at this point that the Help button is a kind of digital Tourist Information Office, but it would be fair to say that the staff do try to help everyone.

The centre in Dunfermline has nineteen staff and there are four desks manned at all times - even 3 a.m. on Christmas Morning! There is also an 'announcer's desk' which is manned continuously. The

two Customer Service Centres can cover each other's stations if necessary and they also work with ScotRail Control in Springburn to resolve issues. Some members of staff have worked the help desks for many years, and accrued a lot of local knowledge.

Decisions are taken here about arranging substitute means of travel, such as the acceptance of rail tickets on a parallel bus route, or the provision of a taxi in extreme circumstances. An extra service offered at some stations is the issuing of vouchers for refreshments in the case of a long delay. For example, at Inverness a missed connection can lengthen a journey a great deal, so the arrangement ScotRail has with the Costa Coffee outlet in the station will be most welcome on occasion.

The room in Dunfermline is dominated by the live feeds from CCTV cameras on multiple screens. A new feature of the 'always on' cameras, i.e. those attached to ethernet systems, is called 'Linger Detection'. The computer system uses algorithms (which are still being refined, based on everyday



experience) to notice two particular kinds of behaviour - trespass, and possible suicide. In the event of either scenario, help can be quickly organised, with the assistance where necessary of the British Transport Police. The BTP, while not monitoring the CCTV itself, is able to access the camera output when necessary. In addition to the bank of screens there are two separate "Event Priority Window" monitors with four potential views each. These are only activated when the system spots something to be checked, and there is also an audible warning to ensure the potential emergency is not missed.

All the FNL stations have at least two CCTV cameras operating. Some are live and some are just recording. Of those, some cameras are not recording all the time, but are triggered by a person's presence. Steve showed me the view inside the small 'museum' room in Helmsdale Station where the camera will record only while someone is there. This keeps the amount of saved material at more remote stations to a minimum.

From the point of view of the Customer Service Centre the new 'request-to-stop' kiosks on some FNL stations have been a great success. They give reassurance to passengers that there is a robust system to ensure that trains actually will stop when needed.

Steve told me about an ongoing upgrade to the Help system which will be completed at the beginning of 2024. This involves the transfer of every Help Point to an ethernet connection where there is a power supply available near the point. Once completed there will be only five stations not connected this way - Dunrobin Castle, Culrain, Kildonan, Altnabreac and, rather surprisingly, Wick. These will be regularly resurveyed so that they too can be upgraded when the power supply becomes available. One of the particular benefits of the upgrade, apart from the extra reliability, will be the ability of the Centre staff to proactively contact the Help Point to reconnect with a passenger with whom they've already been speaking, or just to attract the attention of someone nearby.

As a regular passenger myself, it was especially reassuring to witness the dedication and enthusiasm of those whose job is to help us out when things don't go quite right, or when we're just puzzled. A common theme running through my visits to both Customer Service Centres, and ScotRail Control at Springburn, is the determination to make things as good as possible for us, the passengers.

Ian Budd

LONGITUDINAL TIMBERS RENEWALS

Network Rail has provided us with this account of recent bridge works on the Far North and Kyle Lines.

The longitudinal timber bearings, upon which the rails rest, were replaced on the Shore Street bridge in Inverness and the bridge over the River Taodail south of Strathcarron Station.

The wooden walkways on the Shore Street bridge were rotting and had to be replaced with the white glass reinforced plastic (GRP) seen in the picture above, to give staff a safe platform from which to work.

Working in October 2023 the Rail Systems Alliance Scotland (RSAS) team battled through the weather and Storm Babet to successfully install new longitudinal timbers at Shore Street Inverness over a 54 hr 'no trains' engineering access window.

The existing walkways over the bridge were over 60 years old and at the end of their lifecycle, with signs that the weather was now gaining access and rotting the timber. There had been various visits in the preceding weeks to plan the works and how the full renewal of the timbers would be carried out.

The process of the actual removal of the existing timber bearings was challenging because they were fixed in position by bitumen poured in when boiling hot all those years ago, which still held the old timber in its mighty grip.



The new timbers are made from FFU synthetic wood (fibre-reinforced foamed urethane). Compared to conventional timbers they have a far greater lifespan meaning that future renewals won't be required for potentially decades to come. Since introduction in Japan in 1980, they haven't required any remedial works and have a predicted life expectancy of 50 years before renewal is considered.

At the end of their lifespan they can also be recycled into other products instead of scrapped, bolstering their green credentials. Due to their synthetic structure, they do not absorb water, oil, lubricants, etc. thus are not only greener but offer a safer alternative to traditional timber.

Drilling into the composite timbers provided a challenge versus traditional methods. In one of our first installs of this type we found our normal tools were stressed to produce the results needed.

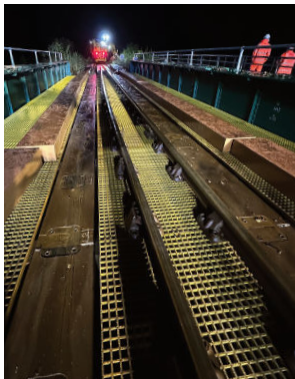
With anything new, there is always a learning curve, and any difficulties were quickly overcome.



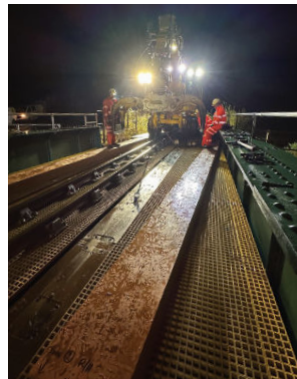
Taodail bridge seen through the window of a Network Rail test train

Network Rail also provided us with a sequence of photos showing the process of lifting the rails, removing the old longitudinal timbers and replacing them with the FFU beams on the bridge over the River Taodail near Strathcarron on the Kyle Line. This project was completed in the week before the Shore Street works. The job was finished in 29 hrs, and the track was handed back 6 hrs ahead of schedule.

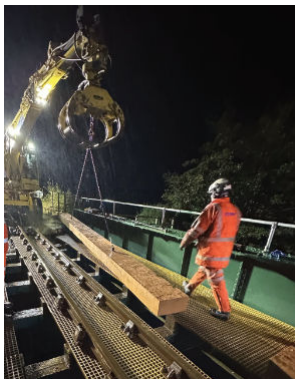
The rails were lifted from the bearing timbers and laid temporarily on the central yellow GRP walkway while the old timbers were lifted out and the new FFU bearings lowered into position.



[Left] The rails have been moved to the centre to expose the old timbers, and the replacement FFU components have been laid out ready for installation.



[Right] One of the old bearings has been attached to the crane, ready for removal.



[Left] One of the new bearings being carefully lowered into position.



[Right] Perfect fit. The first beam ready to be bolted onto the bridge by securing bolts and steel lugs.

RSAS is an alliance of Network Rail, Babcock and Arcadis.

All photos - Network Rail

BRIDGE REFRESH



Photo: Martin Briscoe

The Shore Street bridge, recent work on which is described on the previous pages, also underwent significant reconstruction of the deck nearly 20 years ago, after being struck by an excavator on a loader in October 2003. Having been a frequent victim of vehicle strikes, the decision was taken then to add collision protection beams designed to resist full collision loading and prevent vehicles hitting the bridge itself. They are anchored rigidly to the masonry, and the connections are specially designed to dissipate the load through the stonework and not overload it locally. The beams can be seen in these views and from beneath you can see the gap between the beams and the bridge itself. The comparatively lightweight steel construction is evident when seen from below [right]. The installation of the beams has meant that when Network Rail is informed of a strike it can have confidence that the main structure has



Photo: Network Rail

not been damaged and can continue to run trains pending a full inspection, thereby reducing disruption.



[Left] The all-too-common scenario is seen here in the aftermath of a 2018 bridge strike. A lorry wedged under the bridge after the driver “misjudged the height” of his load. The driver was fined but it is not known whether Network Rail managed to reclaim the cost of over two hours of delays caused while the vehicle was being extricated.

STOP PRESS: 19 December, yet another strike on this bridge.

MIRANDA COTTAGE

www

The **September 2023** issue of *Far North Express* had the news that HITRANS is taking on the lease of Primrose Cottage, the former car hire premises in Strothers Lane, next to Inverness Station, to avoid any tenancy vacation issues.

As outlined in my *Highland Railway Buildings* book this building, then known as Miranda Cottage, was probably the first of the relatively few houses owned by the HR for their employees in Inverness. Because of the availability of housing in the town, the Railway did not feel it normally necessary to build houses for the staff there, as it did in rural areas.

The major exception was the block of cottages built in Railway Terrace in 1889 for the breakdown gang so that they could be quickly called out for an emergency. These were close to the existing Miranda Cottage. In between was the Time Office for Lochgorm Works, which were reached by a footbridge.

Inverness street directories record that in 1899 Miranda Cottage was occupied by Alex Cameron, line inspector. He was still there in 1911, but by then had become the Highland Railway advertising agent. The building was now also recorded as 42 Railway Terrace. In 1930 the tenant was John Mackenzie, LMS inspector.

Miranda Cottage appears in the minutes of the HR Estates Committee, which looked in detail at possible expenditure on the railway's property. In January 1904 there is reference to solving the problem of damp in the cottage, while in December 1907 it was decided to install gas lighting.

It is to be hoped that this Highland Railway survivor will be retained and restored in the Inverness Station Masterplan.



Photo: Neil Sinclair

Neil Sinclair

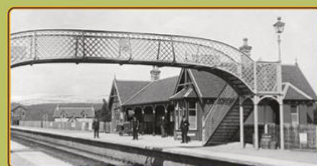
This piece gives us a great opportunity to remind readers of Neil's excellent and fascinating book about the great variety of buildings constructed by the Highland Railway for various purposes. We reviewed *Highland Railway Buildings* in our May 2023 issue. It is full of interesting photographs and history.

It was published jointly by the Lightmoor Press and the Highland Railway Society in 2022.

ISBN: 978-1-915069-04-7

Hardback: 160pp, 274x215mm. £27.50

In the light of the current plans to completely rebuild Inverness Station it is interesting to look at the Highland Railway's own proposals, shown in their 1895 plans, reproduced on p148 of *Highland Railway Buildings*.



Highland Railway Buildings



Neil T Sinclair

JAMIE'S JOURNAL

"Linking up rail and sea could be boost for Far North Line" - Northern Times, 8 November 2023

As convener of the Friends of the Far North Line I'm delighted to see Jamie's excellent support for the Far North Line featured in Jamie's Journal in the Northern Times. As Jamie, our president, says, the railway is already there - no costly building project needed - it just requires some investment. We hope that the Cromarty Firth Green Freeport will maximise use of the railway and see it as the absolute first choice for all its transport needs.

Reprinted with kind permission of the Northern Times.



In my work as an MP, one of the things that gives me the most pleasure is my role as the president of the Friends of the Far North Line. This is because, when I think about it, the railway north from Inverness has always played a large role in my life.

The wee boy running across the field to wave to the engine driver and fireman as the north train is pulled out of Tain station? That was me.

I was brought up beside the railway line. The length of my childhood day was punctuated by the passing of passenger and goods trains in both directions. Later as a teenager, I used to go down to Tain station and talk to Malcolm 'Duckie' Munro who ran the station.

With my first camera, I took pictures of the trucks in Tain sidings and the first green or blue and yellow diesel engines that started to replace the black steam engines when I was about six. When I shut my eyes at night I think back, I am that wee boy again.

Our forefathers, way back in the 19th century, were very far-sighted when they built the railway lines that helped make the UK the world's first industrial giant. Many legacies of the past are merely artefacts of historical interest, such as canals, but this is not the case with the railways.

If we are to be serious about global warming as a country, then using one railway engine – preferably electric – pulling many coaches or wagons, instead of having all those cars and lorries belching out fumes on our roads makes enormous sense.

The Friends of the Far North Line has a membership consisting of people like me: railway enthusiasts. They are something of a ginger group that gives time and thought to how the Far North Line can be improved and made better use of.

Most recently, they made the point that the most welcome announcement of the Cromarty Firth Green Freeport can, and should, lead to more goods – and people too – being transported by rail to Invergordon.

Of course, this was the case during both the First and Second World Wars when the Cromarty Firth was one of the homes of the UK's naval might. There used to be a junction in Invergordon leading to the waterside, but that was torn up when so much of our rail infrastructure was shortsightedly removed by successive UK governments.

But that was then, and this is now. I believe that the old plans should be dusted off and that we should think quite strongly about reinstating this method of getting goods and people right to where

they can be embarked on ships for travel and export.

But it is possibly an even bigger deal than simply the Freeport, it is a fact that as the polar ice cap retreats owing to global warming, cargo ships will increasingly be able to sail all year round what we call the North East Passage to markets in the Far East such as Japan. It is a far shorter route than sailing the other way either through the Suez Canal or around the bottom of Africa.

This could mean that seaborne freight activity might increase both out of Caithness and indeed the old naval anchorage in Orkney's Scapa Flow. Of course, I am crystal-ball gazing, but global warming is a reality, and experts are talking about this route.

We might be very wise to at least plan the necessary rail infrastructure that would help this happen.

But you might say: "We already have a railway line to Caithness". But if the line north of Inverness is used more frequently for passenger and goods traffic, then the trains have to get past each other – and when the line was first built in the 19th century, this was done by means of what was known as passing loops, i.e. stretches of double track where a train could pull up while one going in the opposite direction passed it.

Yes, I am still the wee boy waving at the railway engine, but one thing I do have is the power as an MP to write to the Scottish Government and the UK government to urge them to think about these matters. As I lay my pen down now, my thoughts turn to my next task.

Jamie Stone MP (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)

ELECTRIFYING 'NEWS'

FoFNL was very interested to read 'news' in *The Scotsman* on 4 December of the impending electrification on the Far North Line of which we were unaware.

The paper published a press release by one of the Land & Rural Business Associates at Thorntons, the Scottish legal and property firm, tagline, "We do what's right". It is a pitch for business based on the Scottish Government's plans for rail electrification and the need for local landowners to negotiate with Network Rail on bridge matters and site access.

This extract from *The Scotsman* does make one wonder whether the writer has actually read the Action Plan, or indeed history since the time of the Romans:

"Network Rail in Scotland has a target to be net zero* by 2035 so is implementing the Scottish Government's *Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan* to electrify the rail network across Scotland from Carlisle and Newcastle, all the way to Thurso and Wick."

Amusingly, the original press release on the Thorntons website is illustrated with a photograph of a part of the railway which will definitely not be electrified.

**To be fair to Thorntons, the actual press release refers to "Net Zero" - perhaps The Scotsman's typesetter was also thinking about the Romans.*

Ian Budd



CRUISE SHIP COMMENTS

An item in the 17 November issue of the *Ross-shire Journal*, about the difficulties which can occur when a large number of cruise passengers from Invergordon decide to travel to Inverness by train, produced quite a response from its readers. This is of course hardly surprising, and the report in the newspaper covered it well, having taken the trouble to contact ScotRail for an explanation, and then FoFNL for a reaction, which chimed exactly with ScotRail's comments.

In the next edition the paper introduced public responses to the article:

ScotRail's challenge with cruise line passengers arriving at Invergordon, forcing "regular commuters to wait or endure cramped conditions on trips to Inverness", sparked debate. Adding carriages isn't possible.

The comments made by the letter writers should give ScotRail, Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government pause for thought.

There is a solution...put on more trains! Cruise ship passengers can only get one train back to Invergordon in time for their ship. It's about 2 p.m. That train is so crowded! It's a radical idea ScotRail... instead of lowering fares to encourage people back on trains, why don't you run a regular hourly service on the Far North Line? I'd be happy to take a train into Inverness, but the train times of the service are so dire, I'd need to wait from 11 a.m. until 2 p.m. in Inverness to catch a train home. I'll take my car! - Janette McCutcheon

Try getting a bus when the liners are in. Nightmare - full by the time they reach Alness. I've had hospital appointments during the day where I've needed to travel in with my husband in the car at 8 a.m. and then wait around until my mid morning appointment just so I know I can attend. It's not the best situation. ScotRail and Stagecoach need to work on a proper plan and put on extra capacity. - Sue Brown

Extra carriages don't exist. All the multiple units that are available for use on the line are being used to operate the existing timetable - Glen Wallace

The days of common sense with ScotRail and Stagecoach are long gone. All locals that would get buses or trains are either made to stand or missed out all together - Craig Macdonald

I have to admit I used to get annoyed with the cruise liners that take over the buses but I am just back from Spain and we do exactly the same thing to them so I will be a bit kinder to them. - Elspeth Lawrie

To be fair, people who use the trains may or may not be aware of how railways work. It's not obvious to a casual observer that there is no such thing these days as adding an extra carriage. It's also not obvious, when you are in a train, that the line is single track with very few passing places.

Perhaps the time has come to explain to passengers how things work and what the extreme limitations are. Perhaps if the general public (and unfortunately I include many politicians and journalists in this) actually understood how deficient the Highland railway system is when compared with what's available in the rest of Scotland, there might be more effective calls for investment.

Ian Budd

CALEDONIAN SLEEPER EXPERIENCE

This lamentable story shows how important it is for the sleeper operators to ensure that passengers are delighted with everything they provide.

In the 1960s and 1970s one of the great U.K. rail journeys was the 19:00 *Royal Highlander* out of Inverness to London. It consisted of up to 18 coaches and was always at least double headed by a pair of Class 24s or 26s and sometimes was triple headed. There was nothing better than standing on the hill above the old Daviot station on a summer's evening listening to the locomotives "chuntering" and "straining" up Strathnairn after crawling with their heavy load up the incline to Culloden Moor.

The leading coach was the restaurant car and the dining experience was an enjoyable one. My late father used to leave our house in Inverness in plenty of time to "bag his seat" beside his colleagues before it filled up when heading south on business. David Spaven and I, as students, treated ourselves to dinner when setting off on our European InterRail expedition in September 1972. In truth, the service was always a bit doubtful and we still laugh when we remember the waiter dispensing wrapped pats of butter over the tables – simply thrown as "confetti" to the punters. Some of the soup inevitably sloshed onto the tablecloths as the waiter failed to lurch in tandem with the train. Nonetheless, I have very fond memories of dining on the *Royal Highlander*. It always struck me as a most civilised experience.

Fast forward 50 years to October 2023, and I was delighted to learn that my cousins in Wiltshire, Niall and Victoria, had used the sleeper to and from Inverness for an onward journey on the Kyle Line for a holiday in Plockton. Despite wet weather, Plockton lived up to expectations especially the "delicious" food at the various hosteleries. Of the sleeper experience it was a different story and I quote from Victoria's e-mail (with her permission):

"Not so impressed by the Sleeper. On both journeys, outward and homeward, they were swapping cabins over, so it got a bit chaotic. We were swapped to a different cabin and then had a lady insisting that it was her cabin as that was the one printed on her ticket. We had to explain to her that the stewards were moving everyone around and to go and speak to a steward. Not overly impressed by the food menu on the way up, and then the homeward journey from Inverness was just a shambles in the dining car. I had just assumed that there would be a catering manager based at Inverness and that supplies would be topped up for the journey back down to London. Wrong! Niall and I enjoy eating on the train and it's one of our highlights. Immediately on boarding we go to the dining car. At Inverness for the homeward journey we were told that because they had been really busy on the way up, there wasn't much food left for the London-bound trip. Most of the dishes were unavailable. I said to Niall that, if the worst came to the worst, we would just order a bottle of wine and a couple of cheese platters. They couldn't even provide cheese and biscuits. This is with the station being next to a large supermarket! I would have thought that a catering manager would have overseen stocks at Inverness and, at the very least, done an emergency top-up of cheese and crackers. Seriously not impressed. We also didn't like the fact that there's no saloon facility as part of the dining car. Before, we've had our meal at one of the tables and then moved to the couches for whiskies, coffee, etc. You definitely got the impression that the staff really didn't want you to eat on board and, if you did, then to leave as soon as possible to go back to your cabins. We said that if we did the trip again we definitely wouldn't eat on the London-bound leg. On a brighter note, we were very impressed with the facilities at Euston, having complimentary use of the first-class lounge."

I suppose that's "progress". Old standards of service are often (not always) in decline. It is, however, interesting that my cousins were using the sleeper as a "feeder" to the Kyle Line and that they are questioning whether they will wish to risk repeating the experience. I assume they will not be recommending overnight rail travel to Scotland to others. Perhaps their experience is not typical of normal sleeper journeys but, nonetheless, this must be a concern to those championing the two lines north and west of Inverness.

David Fasken

BUS EXPERIMENT



"The Citylink Experience - fast, reliable and comfortable" - Hmm...

As a long time disliker of long bus journeys, a last minute attempt to buy cheap rail tickets for a hurriedly arranged visit to Inverness prompted me to give the bus a fair trial.

There is no way I can disguise my pro-rail bias so I won't even attempt to. This is a totally subjective account of the experience.

Booking online was easy, however the confirmation email containing the tickets didn't materialise until I thought to check the spam folder. Good start.

Having found suitable times, not very much slower than the train (what a sad reflection on the Highland Main Line) I then had to purchase an earlier ticket due to a hastily arranged lunch meeting in Inverness.

I say "purchase" because, although I have a Scottish over 60s concession card entitling me to free bus travel, booking a ticket triggers a booking fee of £1.00. Consider this a donation towards the cost of the Citylink website.

We left Buchanan Bus Station on the dot. However, after starting and stopping several times for Glasgow's many traffic lights we reached the M8 and then took the M80, however, we soon hit 4 miles of extremely slow traffic passing Cumbernauld. The driver in his frustration took a comedy detour to try and overtake the blockage. Knowing Cumbernauld quite well I knew this was doomed to failure, but it was fun while it lasted. We came back on one

junction later, and probably further back in the queue.

My journey involved a change at Perth. However, on Bus Planet, "at Perth" means "at the park and ride", whose less than lavish facilities amount to a very small bus shelter and a very welcome toilet block, which did at least also have a three-seater bench for a lucky few waiting passengers. We had arrived several minutes late and I wondered whether the five minute connection had been held. I needn't have worried because the extremely helpful and friendly dispatcher (if that is the correct term) was able to inform me that I hadn't missed the Inverness bus as it was running about 25 mins late.

It eventually arrived but it turned out that a coolant warning light was on, so it wouldn't be proceeding until an engineer had arrived to fix it. The kind staff member suggested we all get on the bus anyway, since it was a warmer place to wait. He thought it unlikely that the bus would be fixed before the next service left, so we could probably all squeeze onto that. The next service was ironically the one I'd booked on in the first place. It duly arrived and we all just fitted on board and left quite smartly. I was now running over an hour late so lunch was looking unlikely.

We arrived in Inverness 1 hr 20 mins later than I'd planned, so I caught the last few minutes of lunch, and the planned chat with colleagues was

much curtailed.

I'm pleased to report that the afternoon return journey was uneventful, we left on time and arrived in Glasgow 5 mins early, having taken 3 hr 40 mins.

On board facilities were acceptable - i.e. there was a toilet, and plenty of room for luggage, both handheld and suitcases etc. Buses, like trains, have USB and three-pin sockets for charging. I didn't try these on the first bus, but the second one had a broken USB socket at foot level on the back of the seat in front - hardly surprising that it was bent, and half out of its housing, probably someone had accidentally put their foot on it while something was plugged in. The USB socket on the third bus looked pristine, but was dead.

As the point of the exercise was to compare bus with rail we have to talk about comfort:

Having travelled many thousands of miles by coach in many countries doing my job as an orchestral player, and found most of them pretty uncomfortable, I was not optimistic on this front. The Citylink buses do look very nice and the seats themselves were about as comfortable as my local Class 385's seats - i.e. not very. However, the ride on all three buses was bumpy, jerky, noisy and generally unpleasant, with continuous rough vibration; the noticeably hard suspension sharing every

road surface imperfection with the passengers. This was much worse than the foreign tour coaches I used to dislike so much. I see now why our management always referred to them as 'luxury coaches'.

Add to the discomfort the irritation of having to take lengthy detours to stop at the only two towns served, Pitlochry and Aviemore (Perth is hardly 'served' since Broxden is so far from the city centre) and the bus alternative becomes even less attractive.

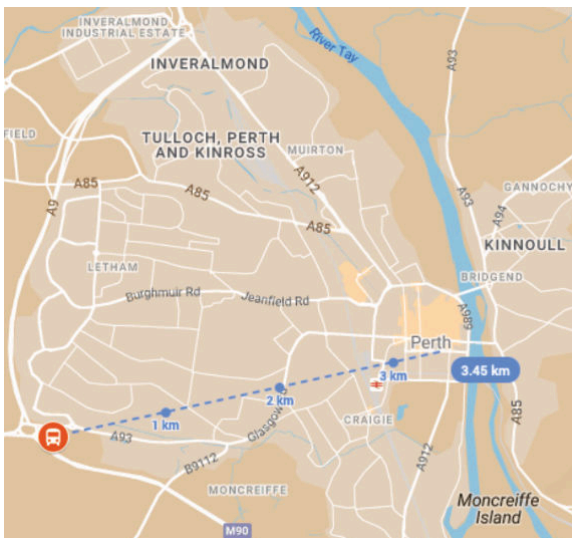
I often travel from Bishopbriggs to Inverness and back in a day. Usually when I get home I sit down, glad to be back, but otherwise unharmed. On this occasion, after spending most of the day trying out the bus service, I collapsed gratefully onto the sofa, still feeling the effects of being shaken and rattled for hours. That was the point at which I said, "Never again if I can help it - why would I subject myself to that voluntarily?"

I have often pondered the necessity to have train routes duplicated by buses, usually concluding that it's because buses are able to stop at places rail doesn't reach, and so for some parts of any given route providing a useful service. However, the Citylink service which duplicates the Highland Main Line doesn't provide any such extra facility and only manages to serve two places already served by rail. This leaves one remaining reason to choose bus over train - cost. If you're under 22 or over 60, and

resident in Scotland, it's almost free, if not it is still cheaper than the train. For me the decision between the two is similar to buying a pair of shoes - I'd rather spend a bit more on something comfortable, than suffer.

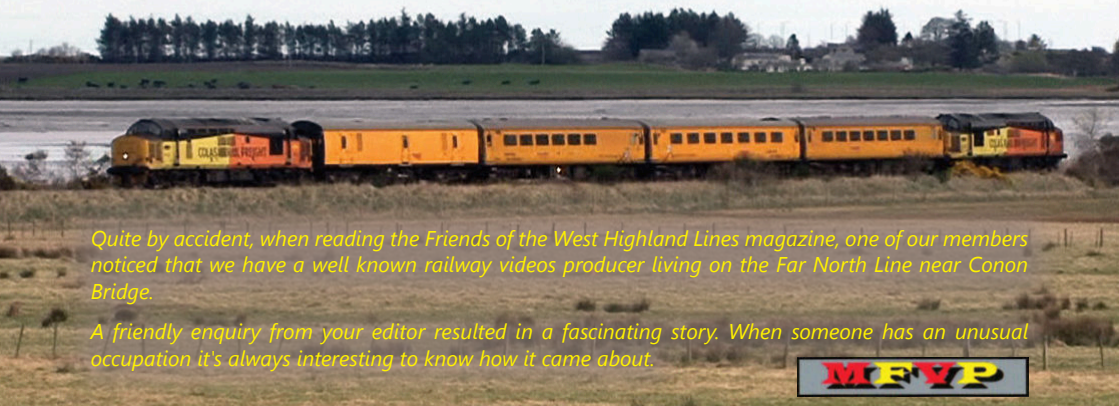
I'm glad to have done this experiment, as it has removed my worry about being automatically prejudiced against bus travel - I now have an excellent reason for *postjudice* - as I messaged to my waiting lunch colleagues on my way to Inverness, "This bus is seriously uncomfortable!"

Ian Budd



[Left] Not exactly serving Perth, but handy if you live on that edge of the city!

MICHAEL FIELD VIDEO PRODUCTIONS



Quite by accident, when reading the Friends of the West Highland Lines magazine, one of our members noticed that we have a well known railway videos producer living on the Far North Line near Conon Bridge.

A friendly enquiry from your editor resulted in a fascinating story. When someone has an unusual occupation it's always interesting to know how it came about.



It turns out Michael Field was the son of a top golf professional who, had it not been for the outbreak of WWII would have competed for Britain in the Ryder Cup. In 1960, as Michael was leaving school, his father became seriously ill. He had no choice but to help his mother run the family golf shop while his father was recovering in hospital. This led Michael, who up until the age of 12 had not been very interested in golf, to become a qualified P.G.A. golf pro himself by the age of 17. In 1970 he set up his own golf schools, first in England and then from 2000 in Scotland, running West Coast Golf until retiring from golf in 2011, teaching in clubs from Ullapool to Muir of Ord. This involved huge amounts of travelling and teaching and heavy 80-hour weeks. As part of his teaching method he began filming pupils as a way of highlighting their progress and showing them their faults. In 1980 Michael made a series of instructional golf films to go with the courses he was running.

Having acquired all the necessary video equipment Michael started covering all sorts of things from motor sport and cycle events to theatre productions, so he started his own company, Michael Field Video Productions (MFVP). By the end of the 1980s he realised that there must be more to life than working 80 hour weeks, so he started visiting heritage railways, rekindling an interest, dating back to organising his school railway club in 1960, arranging visits to steam locomotive sheds with his friends.

He got seriously involved in making railway videos by accident. One of the many *Steam*

Railway magazine readers' trips, organised jointly with Steam Breaks from 1993 until about 2010, was to the Harz in northern Germany. A couple of the guys on the trip asked if he was going to make a film of the weekend. That led to work with Steam Breaks on many trips to the narrow gauge lines in Germany, and then on to narrow gauge and main lines in Poland where he became involved in the *Wolsztyn Experience* - the last steam-hauled commuter service in the world - a handsome compensation for having missed the end of steam in the UK in the 1960s because of his golf work.

Having done so much narrow gauge filming he had accumulated some surplus material so began work on his long-running *The Millennium Narrow Gauge Collection* series - he is now up to Vol 14!

Around 2009 Michael made the first of his *ScotRail Roundabout* series, looking at the Scottish rail scene, mainly in the Highlands, with both modern and heritage diesel traction, showing off the wonderful scenery too.

A steam version was also produced, covering the *Great Britain* tour in Scotland and other specials, as well as *The Jacobite* along with promoting the Strathspey Railway. It's sad that Michael doesn't think there will be enough material for a *Steam in Scenic Scotland* in 2023.

MFVP had two homes, one in Bedfordshire and one in Conon Bridge. Michael has settled in Scotland, trying twice to retire - he says he's getting too old to keep climbing up big hills

with loads of gear for the master shot!

Over the past 30 years Michael has made over 100 railway films from most parts of the world and over 30 travel films with many leading travel

companies, he is very much a one-man band these days with the help of his partner, Marion, filming, editing and marketing.

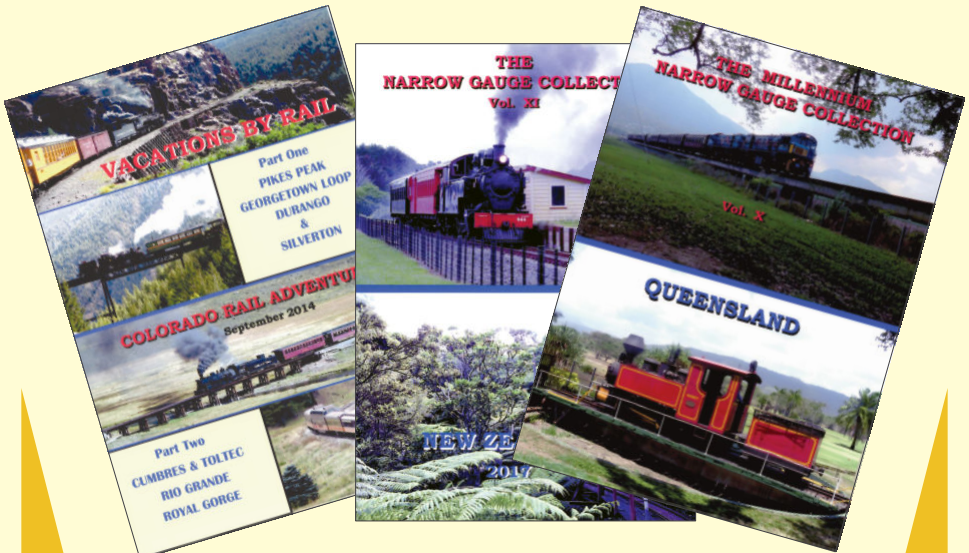
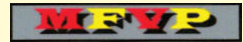
Ian Budd



Michael Field's videos can be ordered direct from:

MFVP, The Rowans, Bishop Kinkell, Conon Bridge, Ross-shire IV7 8AW

01349 861129 m.fieldvideo@gmail.com



TRAINSPOTTING!

47614 and 47593 heading up the hill out of Inverness on the return working to Euston of *The Clansman* tour on 27 February 2022.

Lots of the once ubiquitous Class 47s photographed by Sandy Colley at Feabuie on the Highland Main Line.

Nothing to do with the Far North Line unfortunately, just good to look at!



47806 and 47614 on the *Lord of the Isles Statesman* bound for Rugby on 13 March 2023, having been to Kyle the previous day.



47815 *Great Western* seen on the rear of a *Northern Belle* working to Inverness on 27 March 2022, 57316 was at the front.

