

# FAR NORTH EXPRESS



Issue 93  
September 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	Parliamentary Questions - - - -	20
Pandora	4	Timber Trains Approaching	22
FNL 150 - Forsinard - - - -	5	Witches' Hats - - - - -	23
AGM & Conference 2024	6	Anne-Mary Paterson	24
Membership Matters - - - -	9	Beaully Express - - - - -	25
High Speed Internet on the Train	10	No More Rail Mail	26
Superfast Trains? - - - - -	12	News - - - - -	28
I7C Units To Be Replaced	13	Views	29
Will the Red Light Turn to Green? - - -	14	Introducing SCOTO - - - - -	30
Cassandra	18	Bilbster Family Quest	31
Discontinuous Electrification? - - - -	18	World Heritage Site - - - - -	34
Long-term Decisions Needed Now	19	Book Reviews	35



[www.fofnl.org.uk/fne/cps/fne93.html](http://www.fofnl.org.uk/fne/cps/fne93.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:

Ian Stone MP

### Vice-Presidents:

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:

Iain MacDonald, *Alness*

Richard Mansfield, *Inverness*

Malcolm Wood, *Ardgay*

Les Turner, *Inverness*

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

### Facebook:

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

### E-mail:

[editor@fofnl.org.uk](mailto: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:** 16:00 ex-Wick arriving at Forsinard on 21 June 2024, carrying those who had attended the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary event there and then taken a minibus up to Thurso to travel down from the line's northern extremity.

Photo: **Ian Budd**

## 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

---

**Railways are a service**, not a business. Of course they must be 'business-like' in the way they are run, but one would hope that that would go without saying.

Railways cost a lot of money, but provide huge value in terms of quality of life and in supporting business activities.

Unfortunately, the railways in the Highlands, including the Far North Line, have fallen far behind. They are far too slow and are often made unreliable by the lack of passing loops. The Highlands area is a classic example of how railways are not, and never were, a business proposition. In Victorian times there was little enthusiasm for state provision of anything and we therefore owe a great debt to the railway entrepreneurs who managed to build at least basic railways in the area. The Highland railway knew very well what it would have liked to have built, but it couldn't afford it. We're often being told how the UK is one of the richest countries in the world, yet we apparently still can't (or won't) afford it.

Governments responsible for large operations, such as the railways, seem scared of making, and standing by, essential decisions about what to provide, preferring to take the easy option of reducing everything to a, possibly spurious, "value for money" test. This is encouraged by the accountancy mentality in government where everything is broken down into small units and then individually assessed for its financial performance.

As David Spaven points out many times in *Scotland's Lost Branch Lines*, this can lead to huge errors.

It seems that an accountant's view cannot assimilate the bigger picture. The small decisions made on the grounds of a particular project not being 'value for money' are often to the detriment of the whole system.

FoFNL's much-missed colleague, Bob Barnes-Watts, was forever saying "JDI! - Just Do It" for rail investment in works which are obviously necessary. Sadly, instead of JDI we have STPR2 etc, etc - reports which cost millions and produce generalised conclusions which planners should already know instinctively. As First Minister, John Swinney MSP said in a speech in May, "I will demand from my government more concrete actions and fewer strategy documents."

We have a railway in the North of Scotland which could do so much better if the absolute basics were attended to. It is obvious that attracting passengers requires two of these 'basics' - the trains must run as advertised all the time, including arriving on time; and they must not take too long to get from A to B.

The Far North Line fails both these basic tests. FoFNL is well aware of, and often sympathetic to, the operational reasons. Passengers, especially potential passengers, are not the least bit interested in the reasons.

**Ian Budd**

---

## FAR NORTH LINE 150<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

As readers will be well aware, the Far North Line reached its termini at Thurso and Wick on 28 July 1874.

FoFNL had planned a joint celebration with the Highland Railway Society, the Scottish Association for Public Transport and HITRANS for Saturday 27 July in Wick Station, with the unveiling of a plaque and an exhibition about the railway. Unfortunately ScotRail took the decision to reduce the timetable to avoid the need to ask staff to work overtime and rest days during a period of pay negotiations. This caused the abandonment of the plan for that day.

A plaque will be unveiled at some point this year and the exhibition has taken on a different format. It will now be held for four days, 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> October, in the North Coast Visitor Centre in Thurso. In some ways this is a better result, and we hope that many people will drop in to have a look.

# PANDORA...

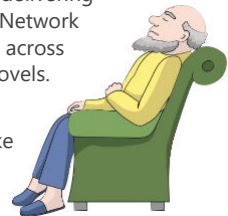
## ...contemplates the wider picture

**There continues to be a dearth of good news** on Scotland's railway. Pandora is writing in late July, so there remains the possibility that the timetable will have been fully restored by the time this is read; that peace and goodwill have settled disputes between employers and employees; that strong men and women have arrived with shovels in The Place We May Not Name. Chickens which might be available for counting are not expected however.

Pandora is thus forced to raise his eyes and - just this once - look at the larger railway scene. Had he been granted one wish by the Fat Controller Fairy he would never have thought of appointing Peter Hendy as Rail Minister. Pandora is not a whole-hearted supporter of the House of Lords as an institution, but he recalls warmly that Andrew Adonis - the last Labour rail minister - did a fine job from the red benches. Maybe the freedom from acrimony in debates in that place allows for better outcomes: we can only hope. A man who can work successfully under two such disparate, look-at-me figures as Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson will surely have worked out how to achieve his policy objectives.

Is it too late to reinstate the sensible parts of HS2, cancelled (in Manchester, of all places) by Rishi Sunak? The six long years wasted on the Williams Review (no, no, you must include my name in it, said an easily forgotten minister) are ... well, largely wasted. Will its remains yield anything useful? One can only hope that a government which has, in many policy areas, hit the ground running will take decisions quickly so that the laborious process of actually delivering can begin. Hendy knows enough from his work-experience job running Network Rail that decisions, when they arrive in his in-tray, will surely scoot quickly across his desk to the other side. And then over to the men and women with shovels. And maybe a tunnelling machine or two.

Pandora is pencilling in a General Election on 3 May 2029 when Starmer, like Blair in 2001, will be returned with another substantial majority. Success in this would be helped by visible progress with the shovels.



## ...and that was where Pandora concluded his thoughts...

Since then, however, an excellent article in *Rail Engineer* has caught his eye. It returns to the vexed issue of how to make trains go if nasty polluting diesel is to be phased out. Roger Ford in *Modern Railways* coined the expression "bionic duckweed" to pour scorn on uninformed Ministers who thought that electricity was on its way out. With one bound bionic duckweed would solve all our problems. Happily the present incumbent at Great Minster House is not taken in by such nonsense, and thought will be given to deciding just what, on each route, will be the sensible choice - overhead wiring, battery, hydrogen. Electrification has massive upfront costs, but once the knitting is up it's a lot cheaper to operate on all levels. Pandora has been down this road before - what is new?

RSSB - the industry's safety chaps - are doing research into fires in batteries which suggests that the risk has perhaps been brushed under the carpet. Not quite as obvious as was thought. HSE - whose remit extends into the world outside the railway - is doing research into what happens when there is a hydrogen leak in an enclosed space - a tunnel, say. Neither piece of research is likely to rule battery or hydrogen out, but the idea that they are easy options is no longer quite so obvious. Bite the (cost) bullet and get on with the knitting!

# FNL 150 - FORSINARD

www

*The first event to mark the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Far North Line in 1874 took place at Forsinard, organised by the Far North Line Community Rail Partnership.*

**On Friday June 21st** some 80 people alighted at Forsinard from the first northbound train of the day. They had arrived to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the opening of the line north from Helmsdale to Wick and Thurso.

Forsinard was chosen for the occasion as it is near the midpoint of the section of line opened in 1874 and also the site of the RSPB Flow Country nature reserve. Climate change concern was one theme of the event and during the meeting the importance of both the preservation of the Flow's carbon capturing peat and of promoting sustainable travel, such as by rail, were emphasised.

Those attending included all the pupils of Helmsdale primary school; their visit made possible by the generous donation of a group travel pass from ScotRail. The school provided a musical welcome and poem for the gathering and then the children were treated to a tour and briefing by RSPB staff about the importance of the reserve – a key element of the Flow Country Partnership's successful bid for the area to be granted UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

Meanwhile in the conference room there was a presentation about the construction and early history of the line from author and railway historian, Keith Fenwick; and from William Bruce an appreciation of his 75 years travelling on the route (half the route's history!) and the changes seen in that time.

An excellent lunch was provided by Forsinard Lodge and the afternoon started with Milly Revill Hayward, RSPB Engagement & Communications Officer speaking movingly about the importance

**Photos: Betty Grieve**



of restoring and preserving the bogs of the Flow both because of their unique ecology but also as a very significant carbon store.

The conference section of the event closed with a panel session covering aspirations for the line and updates on recent developments, followed by questions and discussion. The panel comprised Ian Budd from the Friends of the Far North Line, Michael Willmot from the Far North Line Community Rail Partnership, Frank Roach from HITRANS and Ryan Savage from ScotRail. This and the earlier sessions were expertly chaired by John Yellowlees, ScotRail Honorary Rail Ambassador.

Following this, many of the participants took the coach via Strath Halladale and Dounrey to Thurso and thence the train, to travel the 150 year old route across the Flow, one of the most isolated rail lines in the UK.

The event was generously supported by ScotRail, the Friends of the Far North Line, the Highland Railway Society, Helmsdale Station CIC and Venture North.

**FNLCRP**



# AGM & CONFERENCE 2024

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

**Our 2024 AGM & Conference** took place on Saturday 22 June at the Crown Church in Inverness. The venue was not the one we'd planned to use, which turned out at the last minute to cost more than three times our usual outlay. With great good fortune Richard Arden suggested that the Crown Church would have everything we needed. In the event it turned out to be one of the best venues we've used and we will no doubt return when our rotation system brings us to Inverness again.

It was particularly good that attendees were able to be served lunch in the conference hall, as it was set out with tables all day. The church volunteers who provided lunch excelled themselves with lovely soup and sandwiches and hot drinks available before, during and afterwards.

The AGM which began proceedings covered the routine business side of FoFNL. We were disappointed that Chris Lewcock, who we had recently co-opted onto the FoFNL Committee, decided not to stand because of other commitments. Chris brought useful knowledge of local government and was a great help in the short time he was on the committee.

We were as fortunate with our conference speakers as we were with the venue. However, we had to begin without the usual welcome from our president as Jamie Stone was not an MP on that day, due to the forthcoming General Election, and felt that respecting the 'purdah', or "pre-election period of sensitivity", meant he perhaps shouldn't address us.

Our first speaker was **Robert Gardner**, Associate Director - Digital Connectivity at the Scottish Futures Trust. He brought us the wonderful news that a trial of high-speed broadband on six of our FNL trains will begin in the Autumn. This will be nothing less than transformational as the data speed will be much faster than most Highland residents are able to receive at home, and many times faster than the patchy service offered by most trains using the mobile phone network.

Our next speaker was **Anthony Smith**, erstwhile Chief Executive of Transport Focus, who moved on from there after nearly 25 years. He gave us a most enjoyable survey of seeing the railway from the passengers' point of view.

After lunch we were entertained by stories from **Roger French OBE**. Roger was the Managing Director of Brighton & Hove Buses for many years and now spends his time travelling around the country by bus and train as a kind of 'mystery shopper' looking at successes, failures and everything between.

One of Roger's stories involved one of our members, who was sitting right at the front. Rather than recount it here I'll point you to Roger's blog - <https://busandtrainuser.com/2019/06/20/lejog-as-it-happens/>

The conference closed with updates from Mark Ilderton, ScotRail's Interim Service Delivery Director and Frank Roach of HITRANS.



**Ian Budd**

Left-Right: Robert Gardner (who hadn't delivered his talk in cycling gear!), Frank Roach, Roger French, Anthony Smith and Mark Ilderton.

*Photo: Mike Willmot*

# MINUTES OF AGM 2024

---

Held on 22 June 2024, 11:00 at Upper Hall,  
Crown Church, Inverness

## SEDERUNT

Total 32 members - recorded separately.

## APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

14 apologies received - recorded with  
sederunt.

### 1 Welcome

Ian Budd, Convener, welcomed members to  
Inverness for the AGM.

### 2 AGM Minutes

The Minutes of the previous AGM, held in  
Helmsdale on 23 June 2023, had been  
circulated. No objections or amendments had  
been received.

Adoption of AGM 2023 Minutes:

Proposer: *John Brandon*

Seconder: *Iain MacDonald*

### 3 Reports

Reports by Convener, Membership Secretary  
and Treasurer had been circulated in advance  
of the meeting. No questions were received.

## CONVENER'S REPORT

Ian Budd outlined his annual report which will  
also be featured in the FNE.

## MEMBERSHIP REPORT

Membership figures were stable at around 260  
members.

## TREASURER'S REPORT

David Start explained the current issues  
relevant to the accounts.

It was requested that all members provide  
email addresses where possible.

Adoption of accounts:

Proposer: *Malcolm Wood*

Seconder: *Mike Willmot*

### 4 Election of Officers

**Convener** - Ian Budd

Proposer: *Ian Watson*

Seconder: *John Brandon*

**Secretary** - Neil Wallace

Proposer: *Ian Budd*

Seconder: *David Start*

**Treasurer** - David Start

Proposer: *Iain MacDonald*

Seconder: *Mike Willmot*

**Membership Secretary** - Angus Stewart

Proposer: *John Brandon*

Seconder: *Les Turner*

**Newsletter Editor** - Ian Budd

Proposer: *Richard Ardern*

Seconder: *David Start*

### 5 Election of Committee

• Iain MacDonald

Proposer: *David Start*, Seconder: *Mike Willmot*

• Richard Mansfield

Proposer: *Ian Budd*, Seconder: *Neil Wallace*

• Les Turner

Proposer: *Richard Ardern*, Seconder: *Sandy Colley*

• Malcolm Wood

Proposer: *Ian Budd*, Seconder: *David Start*

### 6 AOB

Grateful thanks were expressed to retiring  
committee member **Richard Ardern**, who was  
standing down after 25 years of activity on the  
committee, including in key roles. Ian Budd  
presented Richard with a book in recognition  
of his long service to FoFNL.

Neil Wallace presented Ian Budd with a book  
*Completing the Far North Line* to mark his 10-  
year anniversary as **Editor** of *Far North Express*.

The meeting closed at 11:35 after some general  
discussion.

**Neil Wallace - Secretary**

## CONVENER'S REPORT

**Starting to write** this year's report brought a slightly depressing feeling of *déjà vu*, since in most ways little has changed on the Far North Line since this time last year.

It's now 19 years since the major temporary slowdown occurred on the line when 25 mins was added to the journey times to combat late running and to meet new safety standards. That prompted the beginning of our campaign to build a loop on the erstwhile double track section of railway near Inverness in order to prevent slightly late southbound trains having to be held at Muir of Ord until a couple of northbound departures have cleared. Given that there is no land purchase required, just two sets of points, a length of track, probable realignment of the existing line, stabilising of the ground, and adjustments to the signalling system, one would have thought it quite a minor project and a no-brainer. But that's not how railways work these days. It seems that the output of strategic project reviews, feasibility studies and reports has become the primary objective of government, with actually building things trailing reluctantly behind.

In 1874 the Sutherland & Caithness Railway reached Thurso and Wick with 67 route miles being completed in exactly three years. 150 years later it's taken 19 years so far to persuade the Scottish Government to build a few hundred metres of desperately needed track, and once agreed it'll probably take many months to be completed. At this moment there is still no news of progress.

It's easy to imagine what Victorian railway builders would have made of the idea of spending several years and millions of pounds in drawing up enormous 'strategic reviews'

The Far North Line has been host to an extraordinary story in recent months. As you know, Altnabreac Station is currently closed because the station house owners do not wish to allow Network Rail, ScotRail or Telent staff access to the platform. Matters came to a head with threats of violence towards workers and eventually some criminal damage to equipment which has resulted in the house residents being charged with "trespassing in dangerous proximity to a Network Rail track;

maliciously interfering with the running of the railway and bringing trains to a halt; obstructing British Transport Police officers in the execution of their duty and behaving in a threatening or abusive manner."

The couple could best be described as 'colourful characters' with surprising and interesting histories. There is currently no news from ScotRail or Network Rail about the station reopening. It is to be hoped that ScotRail turns the sensational notoriety the station has gained to its marketing advantage when it is reopened, and that its fame kindles increased awareness of the wonderful facility of there being a station in such a remote and otherwise inaccessible part of Scotland.

Reliability continues to be a major issue on the Far North Line, with many trains being cancelled or running very late. We are assured that the timetable which commenced on 2 June will help to address the staffing problems but the reliability of the Class 158s is likely only to get worse as time passes.

We have collaborated with our colleagues in the Scottish Association for Public Transport in assembling a list of specifications which we believe are essential for the trains which will replace the ageing units. We have a meeting set up in July with the Head of New Fleet Procurement & Delivery at Transport Scotland, along with Jon Newton, Head of New Fleet Procurement & Delivery at Scottish Rail Holdings. We don't yet know anything of a timescale for replacing our trains, but it seems to be becoming urgent. Unfortunately, 'urgency' may not be enough to trigger rapid action - and trains take time to construct.

Representatives from FoFNL, Network Rail and ScotRail are currently working with the marketing experts in Strathclyde University to survey residents who live within reach of using the Far North Line, but currently choose not to, to ascertain their reasons and to identify changes which could be made to convince them otherwise.

This project was initiated, and is part-funded, by us. Both NR and SR are extremely keen on the idea as it covers an area of data they don't have - it's comparatively easy to survey those that do use the railway but this is a different

approach.

There is one glimmer of good news which should eventually reach the Far North Line: West Fraser is in the process of submitting a planning application for its freight terminal to link with the siding which Network Rail installed as part of the Inverness Airport works.

Presumably, once this is built, WF will look to using it for incoming timber as well as outgoing finished product. It's extraordinary that the lack of suitable timber wagons is the current reason for keeping the potential Altnabreac rail traffic on the roads. One can't help wondering how hard they've looked - especially in the light of recent news that a fleet of 12 Dutch registered timber/pipe wagons has been leased by GB Railfreight to use as translator wagons for moving new Piccadilly Line trains from the Siemens factory at Goole.

The past year has seen FoFNL working as usual - organising meetings with railway industry officials, attending functions and meetings with other organisations, writing countless

emails and having letters published in the press.

Complimentary copies of our magazine are sent to over a hundred people with influence in Scottish railways and we know it is well regarded and widely read. This year we were particularly delighted to read tweets from Alex Hynes after his departure from Scotland's Railway who said on receipt of the May edition, "Required reading on the train", which was followed up by Roger Ford of *Modern Railways* magazine, perhaps the most respected of rail industry commentators, who said, "One of my favourite publications. Always an enjoyable and informative read."

I'd like to publicly thank my committee colleague Richard Ardern, who not only makes frequent contributions to the magazine, but also does a forensic proofreading, without which there would be an embarrassment of errors and unclear wording!

Let's hope the 2025 Convener's Report has more encouraging news than this one!

**Ian Budd - 1 June 2024**

## MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

**In preparation for this year's AGM** I decided, as last year, not to provide printed copies of the AGM papers at the meeting. If we were to rely on printed copies being available it would be necessary to print out 60 copies of a multi-page document. Given that I travel to the meeting on the train from Bishopbriggs, I try and restrict the amount of paper I have to carry to a manageable weight.

These days almost all of us have an email address and access to either a printer, a smartphone or a tablet, so for most people this is not a problem. I will always bring a few copies to cover those who don't have any of the above.

Sending the emails containing the AGM papers did identify five addresses which are no longer correct. They belong to these members:

**446, 447, 559, 632 and 728.**

It would be most helpful if they would send us their current addresses.

Member no. **31** has an email address which returns messages as undeliverable because the mailbox is full.

The following members have not given us an email address:

**33, 235, 260, 282, 349, 367, 373, 404, 480, 488, 503, 504, 516, 522, 539, 542, 543, 560, 562, 581, 586, 587, 624, 639.**

We would really appreciate it if any of those members who do have an email address would send it to us.

We are covered by the GDPR regulations so will never under any circumstances share your email address with anyone.

**Ian Budd**

# HIGH-SPEED INTERNET ON THE TRAIN

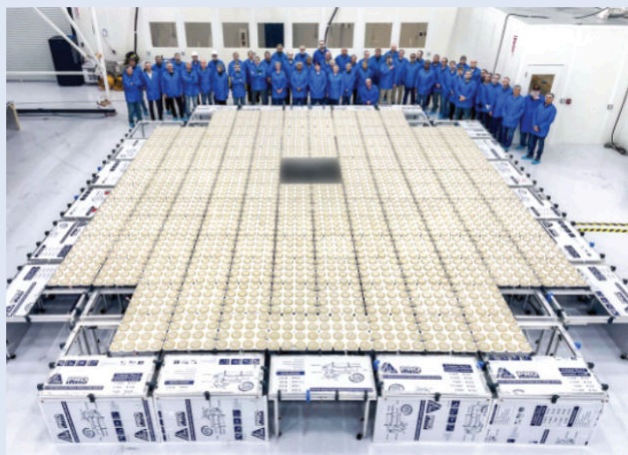
Great news at our AGM & Conference on 22 June! Our first speaker, **Robert Gardner**, announced the trial of low earth orbit (LEO) satellite broadband to take place on the Far North Line this year. **Philip Murray** covered the story, before the trial was definite, for the Inverness Courier.

Superfast broadband is coming to trains in the Far North - in a move which those behind it believe could be transformative and make the region a UK digital leader.

A year-long trial is being eyed up by the Scottish

reliable digital connection for significant periods of time.

Proponents believe installing superfast wi-fi access on these trains will therefore not just prove a boon for visitors to the region, but



An example of a satellite mounted communications array. This was unfolded once in orbit by AST Spacemobile inc in 2022 and has a field of view of more than 300,000 square miles on the surface of the Earth.

Futures Trust which would see trains on the Far North and Kyle lines upgraded to receive broadband via low-orbit satellite.

If it goes ahead the trust believes the move "is liable to deliver the best Wi-Fi experience of any train service in the country".

ScotRail and Highlands and Islands Enterprise are also stakeholders, while rail campaigners at the Friends of the Far North Line added that they think it will be "an absolute game-changer for many potential passengers" if it goes ahead.

Trains on the Far North and Kyle lines currently run through some of the most intermittent and least reliable mobile network areas in the UK, and also feature some of the longest journeys - with services between Inverness and Wick taking almost four-and-a-half hours from end to end. This means passengers can be cut off from a

people living in the north who will now be able to work on the move while commuting - opening more options for remote working too. It is hoped this will encourage more people to



Satellite broadband test rig on North Yorkshire Moors Railway

take the train, and also make the region a digital hub, with the rail depot in Inverness also perfectly placed to become a leader in digital

tech.

An estimated timetable for the trial suggests fitting of the new system could begin this autumn, with it being commissioned in December and the trial then running through until the end of 2025.

A report drawn up by the Scottish Futures Trust, which has been shared by its associate director, Robert Gardner, said: "High-speed broadband internet access on trains would be a major step towards improving the passenger experience and could provide significant benefits to both passengers and train operating companies.

The report continued: "Many rail passengers may need to stay connected to the internet during their journey, whether for work or personal reasons. Providing internet access can make their journey more convenient, attractive, and enjoyable.

"Many people use their commute time to catch up on work, answer emails, or complete other tasks. With good internet access, commuters can stay connected and productive during their ride, maximising their time."

It added that good internet access can enable passengers to stream movies, TV or music to keep themselves occupied on "long and monotonous" train rides. This would be particularly true in winter, where an entire four-and-a-half hour journey can take place in the dark.

The trust also flagged up possible video chats and the use of the wi-fi to stay up-to-date on travel information - such as live train connection times.

The cost of installing the new system could be as little as £26,700 per two-car train, once the setting up and fitting out of the very first unit

took place - with one-off design costs of £95,000 and one-off system integration of £40,000 taking the first train conversion up to just under £162,000.

However, beyond the initial trains, costings to fit out all 25 of the Class 158 fleet based in Inverness - not just those on the Far North Line - is projected to cost just £802,500 if the trial was rolled out more widely.

Overall, the report projects that the cost of introducing the new system on the Class 158 trains based in the north would come to just over £1 million, with just shy of another £1 million being projected if the project were a



success and later rolled out to the 19 Class 153 and 156s which run along the West Highland Line too.

The team behind the Far North trial also added that the new skills acquired would also make Inverness Depot an important digital hub for ScotRail and other operators such as the Caledonian Sleeper.

They added: "A successful project would promote Inverness depot as a national railway centre of digital specialism, which aligns with ScotRail's intention to insource aspects of fleet digital connectivity.

"As well as being the home for the 25 Class 158s which work services in and around Inverness, it is also the home depot for the maintenance of the Caledonian Sleeper (Scotland/London overnight) fleet whereby each set is booked to visit Inverness every 8 days for routine maintenance and a deep clean.

"Staff at Inverness depot would be engaged to modify the vehicles and install the necessary satellite broadband equipment, power connections and associated wiring. The depot and staff would be well-positioned to upgrade the Caledonian Sleeper fleet which could benefit similarly."



Equipment installation area in carriage roof

# SUPERFAST TRAINS?

The article in the *Inverness Courier* published in June picked up on our announcement of speakers at our AGM & Conference. The writer noticed the mention of High-speed Broadband on trains being discussed by Robert Gardner and commented on how transformational this will be.

There were many Facebook comments about the plan and these unfortunately provide a snapshot of the way many people feel about the Far North Line at present. Of course, social media comments are notoriously negative and few people post positive thoughts, but that doesn't mean that the opinions given are any less real. Public perception of the line is key to its success and it's hard to disagree with much of this.

Facebook comments on *Inverness Courier* "Superfast Wi-Fi on Trains" - 13-06-24

*How about more trains first then worry about the Wi-Fi later?*

*"Transformational" would be to have Wi-Fi at all. I find ScotRail are the worst franchise for this, esp 158/170s. If it's working at all, it's paper thin, slow and porous. Better off hot spotting my mobile.*

*Never mind broadband, how about some superfast trains?*

*Be better if they run the trains rather than having wi-fi.*

*The cost of rail fares is ridiculous and they want people to use public transport, plus they are not reliable.*

*Reply: On the Far North Line? Use a Highland Railcard and it's half the standard fares.*

*A reliable, affordable train service would be better before the internet being improved.*

*Build a railway bridge over the Dornoch Firth.*

*Will the replacement buses be connected?*

*A fast internet connection is essential so you can try and work out your journey when delays mean you miss a connection.*

*Superfast and reliable trains would be better.*

*I live near the North rail line and I see empty trains going past several times a day. I know that some passengers will already have got off or are yet to alight but it doesn't look like it's very well used.*

*How about just reliable/fast trains?*

*Hope the Wi-Fi is more reliable than the trains.*

*It'll be faster than the train!!*

*The Wi-Fi on the trains is a complete waste of time. It doesn't work and it never has. ScotRail should concentrate on employing enough staff to cover sickness and holidays - if they did then customers would be able to rely on the train turning up and far more people would use the train.*

*How about super fast trains?*

Strathclyde University is currently surveying the views of residents and visitors around the Far North Line who don't use the railway, to establish their reasons. This survey was initiated by FoFNL, in conjunction with Network Rail and ScotRail, both organisations being keen to hear the views of people they can't easily reach. It will of course be no surprise to find echoes of the above comments, but we're hoping for some less predictable issues to be raised as well.

# I7C UNITS TO BE REPLACED

**News came on 3 September** that the procurement process for an inter-city fleet to replace the HST Inter7City (I7C) units has begun.

No date for delivery has been given, but this is hardly surprising since this is never a quick process. It seems unlikely that any new trains will be delivered by 2030, so the current units will have to soldier on.

When the announcement about the refurbishment of a tranche of redundant InterCity 125 units for use on ScotRail's planned Inter7City network was made, we enthusiastically supported the plan. I



remember writing that people are never put off buying a beautiful Victorian house just because it was built a long time ago, so we should be happy to welcome fully refurbished, extremely comfortable and fast trains, even though they were built over 40 years ago.

Sadly the reality has turned into something of a nightmare for ScotRail and the doubters were correct. Availability of units has never been high enough to guarantee running all the I7C services with them. Initially there would be random substitutions of Class 170/158 units - a public relations disaster. Then ScotRail decided to stop trying to provide the whole service with the units and made it known via the timetable which services would be covered by an I7C set. This was a better solution but still resulted in disappointment if no working unit was available for an advertised I7C service.

Our awareness of the problems is mostly with the Highland Main Line - a route already severely hampered by slowness, long station dwell times and late running because of the lack of passing places - the arrival of a substitute set of stock just compounded the bad feeling.

Work now begins at Transport Scotland and Scottish Rail Holdings to specify the new stock. As ScotRail says in its description of the I7C units, "Comfortably the best way to travel. More seats, more space, more comfort". These are indeed ScotRail's most comfortable trains by far, and the chosen manufacturer must ensure that the new trains are at least as good as these 40-50 year-old ones.

I remember with pleasure travelling between Glasgow and Edinburgh in the same kind of MkIII carriages as the I7C units - sadly the current experience on that line, whilst fast and reliable, is a very poor successor in comfort terms. *The new trains must be at least as comfortable as the old ones.*

**Ian Budd**

*[Above] I7C unit heading through Inverness Airport Station (then under construction) on 24 October 2022*

# WILL THE RED LIGHT TURN TO GREEN?



*Rail campaigning is at times a frustrating, as well as time-consuming, task. Over the years Far North Express has hosted many articles outlining how far behind much of Scotland the Highland railways have fallen.*

*For this issue of the magazine we are simply reprinting this article by Richard Ardern from September 2022 which says it all and is as relevant now as it was then - if not more so.*

**Our 2022 AGM gave us some confidence** that design of the Delmore Loop just north of Inverness is well under way and will be put forward for funding soon. The operational changes to the Far North Line in 2005, which unfortunately brought about a 25 minute deceleration to the end to end journey time, flagged up the urgent need for a loop near Lentrán. Timings have hardly changed since then and any *en route* delays mean passengers are still being seriously inconvenienced and missing connections because of this. That it will have taken nearly 20 years to get this capacity improvement made is highly regrettable.

Funding for everything has got more difficult in the present uncertain economic climate. Highland schemes which have slowly and painstakingly worked their way up the pecking order are particularly vulnerable to being put on the 'To Do' shelf waiting for the purse strings to ease.

When the money situation does ease, history has shown that their funding bid has to start again but in a new situation where they are competing in an expanded pool with other new and desirable schemes which have since appeared. We have seen this so often before.

The UK Government's "levelling up" agenda was supposed to see their Treasury Manual revised to put less emphasis on BCR (Business Cost Ratio) and more on spreading economic progress including new (and retained) jobs being more widely distributed, rather than the current effect of making London and SE England more and more dominant year on year.

It was therefore sad in Scotland to see our ongoing Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2) continuing to put so much emphasis on 'most bang for their buck': "Future passenger rail investment should therefore be targeted on the strongest city-to-city markets as these are the routes where the greatest value from improvements will be realised." [STPR2 Draft Technical Report, P100] This will have the effect of strengthening the economies of Central Belt conurbations and increasing centralisation to the disadvantage of the rest of Scotland.

To my mind the word "Strategic" means having a strategy which ensures the smooth running of the whole nation. It should not be a *stratagem* which gains further advantage for those who are already well provided over those who are relatively disadvantaged!

At the moment train and ferry services to the

further parts of Scotland are seriously challenged by lack of capacity. Rail communications in the Highlands are blighted by too many stretches of single track railway which lengthen schedules and exacerbate the effects of delays, passing them on from one train to another. The capacity to introduce any new freight or passenger services between Perth and Inverness, Aberdeen and Inverness, and Inverness to Wick and Kyle is almost non-existent.

More train paths are needed now in response to the Climate Emergency, to meet the 20% road traffic reduction target by 2030 and to reduce emissions from transport.

Prior to the electrification of both the Highland Main Line and Aberdeen-Inverness (which seems not to be expected before 2030), capacity enhancements are badly needed. Up until 1987 the Crofting Counties Roads Scheme helped to double single-track roads in the Highlands. Would a similar specially designated fund be a quicker way to achieve this for Highland railways?

### **Aberdeen-Inverness**

The recent redoubling of the line from Aberdeen to Inverurie has allowed a three-fold increase in the number of trains at certain times of day, and a hugely improved service.

However, services on the continuation of that line from Inverurie to Inverness are still seriously crippled by lack of further capacity. The first STPR in 2008 promised a reduction to two hours of the journey time between Aberdeen and Inverness. This was Priority 4 and had a target date of December 2016.

Successful trials of freight trains for whisky and timber have still not yet led to regular services and those freight trains which had to use the route as a diversion (when the line south from Aberdeen was blocked at Carmont for two long periods) could only do so once certain passenger trains were cancelled.

The short new loop currently being built at Inverness Airport Station (Dalcross) will help to make operation of the line a bit easier, but the real impediment is the 18 mile single track section from Elgin Station to Keith Loop (just east of Keith Station). Such a bottleneck on the

road would not be tolerated - it would be like having to wait at a set of traffic lights on red for 20 minutes.

The solution to this is to reinstate the Orton Loop just west of the Spey bridge, preferably extending it as a dynamic loop for several miles towards Orbliston.

Given that the Aberdeen to Inverness line improvements were given such a high priority in 2008 it was a real surprise that this work was not included in the 45 enhancements proposed in the 2022 STPR2 redraft. Representations have been made by many consultees to have this corrected.

Reinstated loops are also needed elsewhere on the Inverness-Aberdeen route, in the vicinity of Cairnie Junction and Pitcaple. It is ironic that a line with such potential for tapping in to the profitable whisky industry in Moray and the former Banffshire, which provides so much tax revenue, should be so starved of investment.

The Aberdeen to Inverness line is the only diversionary route to Aberdeen or Inverness when blockages occur between Dundee and Aberdeen, or on the HML north of Perth. Freight contracts are particularly valuable and the trains must get through otherwise the traffic may be lost. Such increased capacity is strategically vital.

### **Far North Line**

On the Far North Line, having now begun the process of addressing single-track limitations, reinstated loops at Kildary, Kildonan (or Kinbrace), and Altnabreac would greatly reduce the serious delays caused by late running escalating to other trains on the line. They would also help increase capacity.

### **Highland Main Line**

On the HML there are four places where new or reinstated loops would be very helpful: Ballinluig, Newtonmore, Murthly and Daviot (where the double-track out of Inverness formerly ended before being cut back to Culloden).

### **Conclusion**

That providing the capacity for more freight and passenger trains is urgent is obvious from the new summer timetable's deceleration of trains from the Central Belt to Inverness. Trains now

have extended dwell times in Perth station to wait for a clear path north. The 19:07 Glasgow to Inverness for example has a 5 minute pathing allowance north of Blackford and another of 8 minutes between Hilton Junction and Perth, followed by a 10 minute dwell in Perth station. At that time of night HML passengers would much rather get home around 20 minutes earlier i.e. 22:19 rather than 22:39 in Inverness!

**Heading photo of Dingwall North Junction, by Sandy Colley**

And continuing with the theme of frustration, in July I wrote on behalf of FoFNL to the new First Minister, John Swinney MSP. Mr Swinney is the constituency MSP for Perthshire North, which contains the southern part of the Highland Main Line, meaning that he has a direct interest in the state of that railway.

My experience of writing to ministers in the past has been that the letter is always passed on to Transport Scotland's Rail Directorate, whose director, Bill Reeve, is often called upon to reply. As FoFNL has regular contact and occasional meetings with Mr Reeve this is an unnecessary step as far as we are concerned, since he knows our views, and we know the TS line on the issues.

In the end, TS' job is to give expert advice to the Scottish Government and also to execute the government's plans. Therefore we need a way to get our points across directly to members of the government in the hope of convincing them to change course. In an attempt to avoid our letter simply being passed on I requested that it should not, in the hope that that might prompt Mr Swinney to be shown the letter.

Of course, this didn't work, and whether he saw the letter or not, TS was given the job of addressing the points I'd raised. The question about 100 new inter-city bus routes between the eight Scottish cities was not addressed - perhaps because it had been either an embarrassing statement, or a misquote in the press.

On the subject of rail investment it was pointed out that rail spending represents a major part of the Scottish transport budget - but our point is that this is mostly maintenance and subsidy and what's needed on top of that is more

The 15:07 Glasgow to Inverness is similarly challenged with a 15 minute stopover in Perth.

Both First Ministers since 2008 have said, "Railways must compete with roads". Please give us the tools to do so. The red light on capacity urgently needs to turn green on these lines.

**Richard Ardern**

infrastructure investment to address the Highland rail shortcomings.

Our criticism of the extreme cost about to be spent on dualling the rest of the A9 between Perth and Inverness, which is not required for capacity purposes, was answered by a reminder that the A9 is an essential route in Scotland, and an assurance that the Scottish Government's vision is that the use of greener and more sustainable transport modes continuously grows in Scotland.

We agree that the A9 is an essential route and are pleased that the money spent on it in the 1980s has given us a fast road with plenty of capacity. However, we struggle to see evidence of the Scottish Government's vision for continuous growth in rail use in the Highlands, since there is no sign of any investment to make that happen.

In conclusion, it is very difficult to see how to get the message across to the Scottish Government that some of its actions on transport are in direct opposition to its declared policy of modal shift. The case for the dualling of the A9, which the government accepted many years ago, specifically mentions that it will result in modal shift from rail to road. Combine that with the fact that its "business case" had to include an invented monetary value of £420m to represent the reduction in "driver frustration" that dualling would achieve, in order for it to reach the required threshold, and it's easy to see why rail campaigners are aghast that the government should find it acceptable to spend £3,000 million (or more likely around £5,000 million at today's prices) on that when the railways in the Highlands are so hobbled by their inadequacies.

**Ian Budd**

*This letter to John Swinney MSP was written in response to a headline in The Scotsman on 23 July which read, "The Scottish Government is to invest millions to create 100 new inter-city electric bus routes."*

*Given that we have inter-city railways this seemed a counter-intuitive promise. Far better to spend some millions on bringing the railways in the Highlands up to an acceptable standard.*

## THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE



**Cairdean Na Loine Tuath**  
*the campaign group for rail north of  
Inverness - lobbying for improved  
services for the local user, tourist  
and freight operator*

Mr John Swinney MSP  
First Minister  
The Scottish Government  
St. Andrew's House  
Regent Road  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

24 July 2024

Dear Mr Swinney,

We note the Scottish Government's £42m support for 'decarbonising' the bus fleet and providing more charging points for buses and HGVs announced this week.

However, in the light of the current virtual freeze on rail investment in Scotland (i.e the provision of funds for increased line capacity, as opposed to money for maintenance) we are concerned that you are quoted as funding vehicles which will serve "100 new inter-city bus routes". In any case, we're struggling to imagine 100 new routes between the eight cities.

By far the most efficient, economical, comfortable and quickest way to transport people between cities is by train. Instead of wasteful duplication on these routes, buses are much better deployed in a local and 'feeder' capacity.

Large parts of the Scottish rail network are currently hindered from effective and reliable operation by the Victorian legacy of single-track lines, which was not addressed as it should have been, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

We note that the Scottish Government is willing to spend extremely large sums on the conversion of the remaining single carriageway sections of the A9 between Inverness and Perth when there is no capacity issue on this already wide and fast road. The safety concerns in these sections could be addressed much more cheaply using the Swedish 2+1 system adopted by many countries to avoid head-on collisions. This would leave more money available to tackle the serious capacity and reliability issues on the parallel railway line.

We hope that there will soon be an announcement about major rail investment in addition to the already promised electrification in the Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan. We are certain that rail should be at the forefront of the Scottish Government's mind in transport planning.

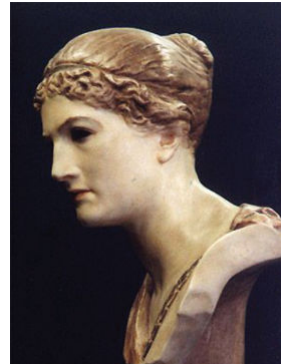
This letter is intended to be read by yourself and I would respectfully request that it is not passed on to Transport Scotland for a reply. We already have frequent and good communication with the Rail Directorate there and do not wish to waste their time with constructing an official reply.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Budd, Convener, FoFNL  
3 Villafield Loan, Bishopbriggs, Glasgow, G64 3NZ

# CASSANDRA

---



## She has shaken her hoary locks again ...

... and reminds her readers of what she wrote - was it only a year ago?

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

Cassandra is delighted that the unspecified person to whom her wise words were addressed has now taken shape. The Minister could not, even in Cassandra's wildest dreams, be better qualified to listen, to question, to weigh and to decide than Lord Hendy, scarred and bruised as he is by the necessary years he has spent in preparation - though he can hardly have expected it - for his new incarnation. Cassandra wishes him well.

If it is not impertinent Cassandra likes to think of the three H's. Haynes, Hendy, Hynes. The latter seconded from looking after Cassandra's primary interest - the Scottish Railway - to supposedly greater things down south. A change of thinking in the DfT has doubtless happened as the Secretary of State can relax, knowing that she has a Minister perfectly capable of getting it right all by himself. Well, with the other two H's helping as needed. Cassandra is confident that wise counsels are being sought (and offered) and that the SoS, knowing that the railway is in professional hands, will say "get on with it then" when a recommendation crosses her desk. A new government which wishes to impress the electorate with its efficiency will not wish to have the deadening humming and hawing so prevalent in the last half dozen years to drag it back.

And yet, and yet. Cassandra has never been famed for her sunny cheerfulness. While Great Minster House may be a hive of activity there seems to be a gap - silence - up here. The Scottish Government is committed in law to a timetable of electrification so that diesel traction is all but eliminated. Cassandra is aware that money is tight, that Scottish Ministers, facing an election in just over a year and a half, know that for every rail passenger delighted there are a dozen motorists moaning. But the law is the law. If, as seems quite possible, a different party forms the next Scottish Government the present one must ensure that progress is made, that reversing the policy is impossible, and that - whoever is in Bute House in May 2026 - the decarbonisation of Scotland's railway is not slowed. By then H3's two years down south will be almost over, and H1 and H2 can probably manage by themselves ...

---

## DISCONTINUOUS ELECTRIFICATION?

[www](#)

In a thought-provoking piece inspired by work Hitachi and Siemens are doing on the development of battery trains, Roger Ford, *Modern Railways* magazine's Industry and Technology Editor, covers some of the issues currently under investigation and considers the future...

All rail campaigners probably agree deep down that the only 'correct' traction solution for railways is overhead electrification. Everything else is a less satisfactory compromise, but we do acknowledge that electrification is far from cheap (although perhaps more economical in the very long term), so battery assistance is going to be needed on whatever replacement units the Far North Line eventually receives.

**Roger's article** is definitely worth a read!

# LONG-TERM DECISIONS NEEDED NOW

*This letter was published in The Herald on 29 August in response to the news that the Scottish Government is ending the suspension of peak rail fares from 27 September. Although it is easy to understand ScotRail's view that the money spent could be better used in other ways to encourage modal shift, it was disheartening to hear that "ministers said the money would be better spent on tackling climate change and child poverty."*

We must take long-term decisions if we want to sort out our public transport woes

*There is a basic injustice in charging people double for travelling at a time not of their choosing. To some degree it is understandable that the operator wishes to recoup the cost of needing more trains to cover peak services, and it is also common practice to try and manipulate travel decisions by charging more, or less, for certain services - airlines do it all the time. However, peak travel is certainly not optional for those that do it, and forcing them to pay more does not encourage rail use and it does no good to rail's public image.*

**My late father-in-law** lived in Malaysia. When visiting, I was often struck by the way that the people discussed transport. Their government has tried to tackle the problems with the transport network and, when they do, they talk about the "first and last mile".

Getting to public transportation and getting to your destination is often hobbled by that first and last mile and, boy, is that true in Scotland.

Last week, the Scottish Government ended its peak time rail fare experiment ("Dismay as peak rail fares return", *The Herald*, August 21). On the one hand, it had failed to meet the success criteria: it wanted a 10% increase, uptake was only 6.8%.

Twenty-five years ago, I studied a unit called The Economics of Transport. Economists were stressing the need for an integrated transport policy which would allow for buses to tessellate with rail; for effective park and ride schemes, for congestion zones, a quarter of a century ago. In essence, solutions to the first and last mile.

What we got was further fragmentation, further privatisation, a relentless march of higher prices and worse services.

The Scottish Government has taken ScotRail and the Caledonian Sleeper back under its wing and is making tentative toddles towards sorting things. But the Government will continue to fail to meet its climate targets if it does not take long-term choices, invest in them and leave them to play out over the long term.

Transport infrastructure investment, the multiplier effect of jobs in manufacturing, staffing and providing these systems is inherently good for an economy.

But it is not a quick fix. And the Scottish Government is not able to do long-term planning because of the short-termism imposed by Westminster: no borrowing powers on international money markets, no guarantee of stability in the block grant, a requirement to balance the budget annually.

Sartre said "hell is other people". In order to make sharing a confined compartment with those other people, public transport must be cheaper, more reliable, more frequent and less attractive than a hermetically sealed box of your own company.

We're not there yet and this week we moved further away.

**Peter Newman, Edderton**

**Question S6W-27087: Tim Eagle**, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered 7 May 2024

*To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any new passing loops that are (a) completed and (b) in progress, on the Highland Main Line, as per the recommendation in the second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2).*

**Fiona Hyslop:** Phase one of the Highland Main Line Improvement Project was delivered in December 2012, increasing services from 9 to 11 trains per day in each direction, and reducing journey times by an average of 6 minutes at a cost of £1.2 million.

Highland Mainline Improvement Project Phase Two was completed in March 2019 at a cost of £57m. This phase delivered signalling upgrades at Aviemore and Pitlochry stations, along with an extension of the passing loop at Aviemore and the reconfiguration and extension of the platforms at Pitlochry. The infrastructure work delivered already and an integrated approach to passenger and freight timetable patterns have created capacity for additional rail freight on the Highland Main Line.

There are no active enhancement projects on the Highland Main Line. However, Transport Scotland continues to revise its programme of works against priorities in the context of available funding. This ensures Transport Scotland can deliver the right projects at the right time as it seeks to progress its rolling programme of decarbonisation, whilst also delivering rail passenger and freight services that meet user expectations.

**Question S6W-27646: Liam Kerr**, MSP for North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered 16 May 2024

*To ask the Scottish Government for what reason it provides freight facilities grants for rail freight and coastal shipping terminals but not for wagons.*

**Fiona Hyslop:** The Scottish Government recognises the importance of modal shift to help achieve transport emission reduction targets. The Freight Facilities Grant scheme is designed to provide assistance to companies who wish to move freight by rail or water instead of by road. The scheme required State Aid clearance and under the terms of the approval rail and water haulage equipment, including rail wagons, was prohibited from support.

**Question S6W-27663: Liam Kerr**, MSP for North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered 3 June 2024

*To ask the Scottish Government whether the ScotRail rolling stock procurement plan is paused; whether procurement of new railway rolling stock is on track to deliver on the decarbonisation action plan, and whether diesel-powered passenger trains will be removed from the ScotRail network by 2035 as planned.*

**Fiona Hyslop:** The ScotRail rolling stock procurement plan has not been paused.

The Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan, which was published in July 2020 is currently being refreshed which will include consideration of the timescales for removal of ScotRail diesel stock.

**Question S6W-27644: Liam Kerr**, MSP for North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered 3 June 2024 [This and the subsequent question received the same answer.]

*To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on (a) what the outcomes were of the Lifting the Spirit trial at Elgin in 2013 and (b) whether it was operationally successful, and what it did to build on that trial.*

**Question S6W-27645: Liam Kerr**, MSP for North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered 3 June 2024

*To ask the Scottish Government for what reason the trial in 2020 of bringing timber out of Caithness by rail has not been meaningfully followed up, in light of it reportedly being successful.*

**Fiona Hyslop:** The movement of freight is a commercial matter and the Scottish Government's leadership in support for rail freight is outlined in our 2016 rail freight strategy, and put into practice with significant investment, a freight-first approach, and through our regulatory rail freight growth targets. The 2020 timber by rail trial in the Far North of Scotland proved the concept and provided lessons for the industry on the Scottish timber market, rolling stock/wagon capability and availability, operational considerations and the finances/economics of moving timber by rail. It is for the industry to lead on any follow up activities and Network Rail remains engaged with the industry through the Scotland Freight Joint Board and works with Freight Operating Companies and Freight End Users to enable modal shift to rail.

**Question S6W-27900: Ariane Burgess**, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Green Party, answered 6 June 2024

*To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with (a) Transport Scotland and (b) ScotRail regarding the delivery of hourly train services between Inverness and Aberdeen, as committed to in the first Strategic Transport Projects Review in 2009 and which has not been included in the new train timetables.*

**Fiona Hyslop:** My officials at Transport Scotland meet with ScotRail and Scottish Rail Holdings regularly to discuss various matters. ScotRail keeps its services under constant review to ensure they best meet the passenger demand.

Since the publication of the 2009 Strategic Transport Projects Review, the Scottish Government has invested £330 million in delivering journey time improvements and greater connectivity for both passenger and freight services operating on the line between Aberdeen and Inverness. These works were undertaken as part of the Aberdeen – Inverness Rail Improvement Project.

**Question S6W-28823: Paul Sweeney**, MSP for Glasgow, Scottish Labour, answered 15 August 2024

*To ask the Scottish Government whether funding will be made available to support ScotRail train driver recruitment, in order to phase out the reported need to depend on rest day working for the operation of a full timetable.*

**Fiona Hyslop:** ScotRail has been recruiting more staff to minimise reliance on staff working on rest days or overtime. ScotRail now employs 250 more train drivers than it did prior to public sector ownership. In addition, 160 Train Drivers are currently being recruited, the highest number ever, and ScotRail plans to continue its recruitment for Train Drivers in the coming years.

All ScotRail staffing costs including the funding for the planned recruitment are reflected in the current Transport Scotland rail budget for the financial year 2024-2025.

**Question S6W-29339: Claire Baker**, MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife, Scottish Labour, answer expected 25 September 2024

*To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to monitor changes in rail passenger activity following the end of the ScotRail peak fares removal pilot on 27 September 2024.*

**Question S6W-29338: Claire Baker**, MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife, Scottish Labour, answer expected 25 September 2024

*To ask the Scottish Government how information on the ScotRail peak fares removal pilot was targeted at (a) those on lower incomes and (b) non-rail users.*

[Answers to the last two questions will be available on the companion web page in due course.]

# TIMBER TRAINS APPROACHING

www

In June West Fraser moved to another stage in the process of building a rail facility at their factory at Dalcross (formally Norbord).

Two public consultation sessions took place in June and gave interested parties the chance to look at the plans and discuss them with WF staff.

Our member Colin Alston attended the first session on 6 June. The main points he took away were:

- WF plans to run 2 trains of 14 wagons per day down to Coatbridge, though initially just one
- it will use the Tesco containers until it has its own stock
- possible arrangement for the trains is to travel north in the afternoon, spend around three hours at plant, then head back south overnight
- the train will run directly into the siding as it will have a locomotive at each end
- the main driver for the switch to rail is environmental as the parent company has set standards it needs to reach worldwide by around 2030
- roughly 70% of the plant's production goes into the UK with the rest exported to mainland Europe by sea from Inverness
- initial efforts are to switch the transport of finished products to rail, at a later date incoming timber will arrive by rail
- a WF employee Colin spoke to said that the Georgemas trial had gone well, and noted that WF's Canadian plants only use rail for incoming and outgoing movements
- total project cost is around £10m, £3m of which is needed for the 24-30m high gantry crane

The formal planning application is expected to be lodged later this year once various details have been settled.

A newspaper report in June noted that the proposed development is anticipated to remove the need for around 20,000 HGV journeys per year and support West Fraser's planned expansion of their business in Scotland.



Network Rail preparing the track in 2022

West Fraser's application submission states: "The objective of the proposed development is to provide an alternative means of transporting materials to and from West Fraser's existing site via the use of rail instead of road."

We understand that there are currently no suitable timber wagons available for transport from the planned loading facility at Altnabreac. We are sure that this situation won't be allowed to derail the company's plans.

Ian Budd

# WITCHES' HATS

Witches' Hats have appeared on the Far North Line - yes, that is their official name!

They are cone shaped platform end markers used in conjunction with barriers and locked gates.

New stations routinely feature such systems to deter unauthorised access, via platform end steps and ramps, to railway tracks and associated dangers.

Trespass related incidents are also a concern on the Far North Line, hence the installation of some of these features at several of the stations to visually augment the existing red No Trespassing signs.

However this has resulted in a rather peculiar outcome when comparing similar platforms.

Consider Muir of Ord Station for example:



The witches' hats are made from recycled tyres, especially from aircraft. They can often be seen in large panels between the rails to deter people from venturing off the roadway at level crossings.



[Left] Platform 2 south end - no witches' hats, barriers or locked gate

[Right] Platform 1 south end – installation of witches' hats, barriers and locked gate (with a gap on inside)



[Left] Platform 1 north end (on right) – no witches' hats, barriers or locked gate

Platform 2 north end (on left) – no witches' hats, although it does have an existing barrier with a large gap

There are similar variations to be found at other stations, such as Invergordon, Tain and Ardgay, and only about half of the smaller stations include any of these new visual deterrents to trespass. As trespass can often go undetected in rural areas, there is a case for greater consistency.

Neil Wallace

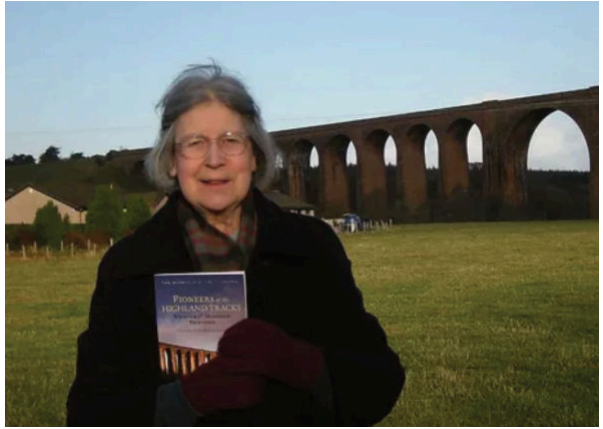
# ANNE-MARY PATERSON

It is sad to report the loss of one of our most well known members. Anne-Mary Paterson died on 25 April 2024 aged 86, after a short illness. Anne-Mary was a familiar figure at our AGMs and many other rail events.

To us she was the writer of three books about Highland railways:

- *Pioneers of the Highland Tracks - a Biography of William and Murdoch Paterson*
- *Spanning the Gaps - the Bridges and Viaducts of the Highland Railway*
- *Lairds-in-Waiting*

To others she was a member of a distinguished Beaully family, with a long history in the village; or a member of the 'Shinty Family' as her father had been Secretary, and then President, of the *Camanachd* Association, the world governing body of the Scottish sport.



Anne-Mary characteristically manning the FoFNL stand and talking railways at Highland Heritage Day in Dingwall, 4 March 2023. Photo: Neil Wallace

In a tribute to Anne-Mary, Hugh Dan MacLennan, a Scottish broadcaster with a specific interest in shinty said, "Anne-Mary's passing represents the end of an era in terms of the family's history in the Beaully district. She more than played her part in unravelling and remembering the past. She was a giant of a figure in terms of her work, her diligence, and her sincerity. In addition, she was kindness personified and will be hugely missed by people, families, and communities from Beaully to Canada."

Anne-Mary's books are all available on the Highland Railway Society website [<http://hrsoc.org.uk/Publications.html>] and occupy a special place in the Highland Railway narrative.

As well as her work documenting aspects of the Highland Railway, Anne-Mary was also a regular contributor to radio and TV programmes including Channel 5's *World's Most Scenic Railway Journeys* and Michael Portillo's *Great British Railway Journeys*.

**Ian Budd**

*Our companion web page for this issue features some of Anne-Mary's own thoughts written during lockdown, when everyone was finding new ways to keep in touch and be productive.*

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

# BEAULY EXPRESS

*It's always interesting to see how we are viewed from 'the outside'. This article, by News reporter max Parry, appeared in the Daily Express on Boxing Day 2023 and paints an attractive picture...*

**Railway stations** can sometimes be confusing and overcrowded, seemingly impossible to navigate as passengers race to their carriages before they pull out. These problems don't apply to the station with Britain's shortest platform. Beauly Station's solitary platform is so wee, you're more likely to fall off it than struggle to find it.

The station, which was reopened in 2002, is hardly even a station. No terminal, no ticket office, no information centre - Beauly Station is just a platform, a waiting shelter and a car park.

The platform is, according to *The Railway Magazine*, only 49½ feet (15.06 metres) long. That means it is shorter than a single carriage on the British Rail Class 158 Express Sprinter trains that pass through.

The Highland village is connected by the appropriately named Far North Line and is around 10 miles from Inverness. It can be reached in under four hours by rail from Glasgow.

If you are fortunate enough to be passing through the tiny village, there are many reasons to get off the train and have a look around. Top of the list for anyone visiting Beauly should be the Aigas Field Centre. The centre is a wildlife haven and offers courses for those looking to learn more about the ecosystem of the area.

One visitor, from San Diego, California, took to Tripadvisor to review the place. The impressed holidaymaker said: "What a wonderful experience! Beautiful and peaceful property, offering great meals and interesting excursions. At the beginning of the week I met travelers that had visited multiple times and wondered why, after a couple of days I completely understood."

"Everyone at Aigas were so kind and knowledgeable. A great place to unplug and really appreciate nature."

Of the other attractions in Beauly, the village's Priory is a must-see. Dating back to around 1230, the ruins are what is left of a Valliscaulian monastic community.

A Tripadvisor user glowed about the ancient structure, telling prospective visitors to the area: "These small but stunning ruins are a must if you're visiting the area! The priory was founded in the year 1230 as a Valliscaulian monastery for a group of monks from France. It fell to ruin during the reformation, like so many others.



"The priory is unusually long in structure - and there are some rooms off to the side as well. The whole thing is full of ancient tombs - many of which belong to members of Clans Fraser and Mackenzie. There are some lovely *memento mori* scattered about. And lots of information signs telling you tidbits of the history.

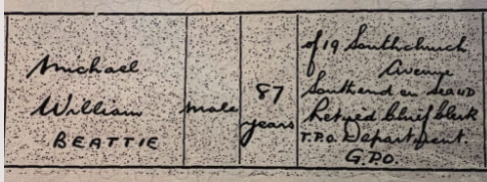
"There's even an ancient sycamore tree to the left as you enter the grounds - hundreds of years old and full of crows nests - definitely adds to the eerie ambiance haha! There used to be a very creepy, 800 year old wych elm out front too but it fell and is no longer there sadly."

# NO MORE RAIL MAIL

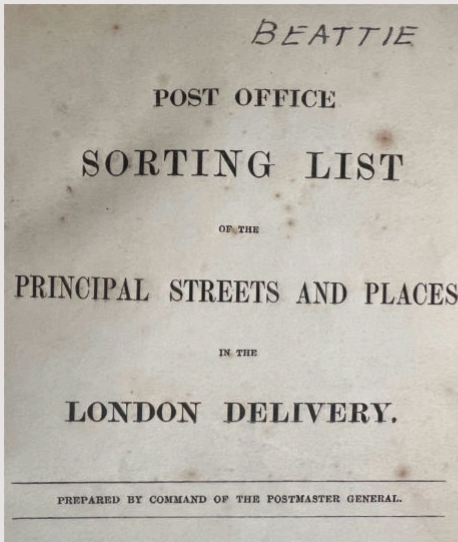
*Dr Lucy Beattie, PhD, railway enthusiast, and resident of the Far North, finds an interesting family connection.*

**The end of the Royal Mail Trains signals the end of a long history of post by rail.**

death certificates and found he was born in 1862 in the Vale of Avoca, Ireland and died without much note in 1949 in Southend-on-Sea Essex.



But what was interesting to learn was that his profession was listed simply as "Retired Chief Clerk - TPO - GPO" and this led me to a fascinating journey of discovery in both personal and postal history. Michael Beattie had left Ireland at the turn of the Century as many others did. He landed in Toxteth Liverpool with very little means. Despite this, he gained a scholarship to study in Liverpool and renounced his Irish Citizenship to join the GPO as a postal clerk. Although the family story was that he had set up some of the early postal code systems and been involved with the Travelling Post Office, my father had left very few clues beyond this ledger that I still have to this day.



Theobald's Street, Elstree - -	N.W.	Three Cranes W
Thirza Place, Old Kent Road -	S.E.	Three King Co
Thistle Grove, Fulham Road, West Brompton	S.W.	Throgmorton S
Thomas Street, Backchurch Lane, Whitechapel	E.	Thurloe Square
Thomas Street, Grosvenor Square	W.	Thurlow Place,
<i>Thomas St. George Road</i>	<i>W. East</i>	<i>Thurlow</i>
Thomas Street, Kingsland Road -	N.E.	Tibberton S
<i>Thomas St. Highbury</i>	<i>W. East</i>	<i>Tibberton S</i>
Thomas Street, Millwall, Poplar -	E.	Tichborne Str
<i>Thomas St. East Bow</i>	<i>W. East</i>	<i>Tichborne Str</i>
Thomas Street, New Kent Road -	S.East	Tillotson Plac
40 Thomas Street, Old Kent Road -	S.E.	Tilney Street,
Thomas Street Waterloo Road, Lambeth	South	Times Newspa
<i>Thomas St. Little Lambeth</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>Times Newspa</i>
<i>Thomas St. Hamford St</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>Times Newspa</i>
Thomas Street, Whitechapel Road	N.E.	Tisdall & W
Thompson & Co.'s East India Army Agency Office, Old Broad St.	E.C.	Titchborne Str
Thornbury Park, Stoke Newington Common	N.	

So, with the help of some records from the British Civil Service and a kind researcher at the Postal Museum I started to piece together a small part of my family history. It was a unique experience to visit the museum in London, which now lies right next to Mount Pleasant a former hub that was once one of the largest sorting offices in the world. Here I was able to access his Civil Service records and learn more about his job as a Chief Clerk of the Travelling Post Office (TPO).

Across the road from the main museum building is Mail Rail, an interactive exhibition that tells a story of the history of communication and the role of the railway which heralded a new era of fast mail to

the far north. Two specially constructed trains convey visitors on a 1km section of the 2' gauge Post Office Railway which ran driverless electric trains between Whitechapel and Paddington from 1927 to 2003, linking eight sorting offices.

The TPO system, an innovation in the 19th century, revolutionised mail delivery between Scotland and London. Initiated in 1838, the TPO facilitated the sorting of mail en route, significantly expediting the postal process.

Trains were equipped with sorting carriages, allowing postal workers to organise mail while travelling. This innovation was critical during an era when communication was vital for both personal and commercial activities. The TPO's efficiency not only enhanced the speed of postal services but also symbolised the burgeoning industrial advancements of the time, linking distant communities through a reliable and rapid communication network.

By the mid-20th century, the TPO had become an integral part of the UK's postal system, ensuring timely delivery of letters and parcels across long distances. The London to Scotland route was particularly significant, serving major urban centres and facilitating economic and social connectivity. Despite its eventual decline due to advancements in technology and changes in transportation infrastructure, the legacy of the TPO remains influential.

The TPO system underscored the importance of adaptable and innovative logistical solutions, paving the way for modern postal services. The Royal Mail has alas gone through a series of iterations and now as a privatised company it seeks to make savings. Last month they announced that after almost 200 years of conveying mail by rail they will decommission their last remaining dedicated electric multiple units by the 10th October 2024.

From a personal perspective I feel sad to see them go, without ceremony, or note. Indeed without any recognition of the logistical advances created through the unity of mail and rail. To reflect on this I am grateful to share a small personal history and to enjoy the WH Auden poem from the GPO's 1936 *Night Mail* film which can be found on the magazine's companion page.

[WWW](#)

The 1936 GPO film is well worth a watch. There are many interesting railway shots, accompanied by music commissioned from Benjamin Britten and the specially written poem, which was designed to be spoken over the film and music. <https://archive.org/details/night-mail-1936> or you can use the QR code.

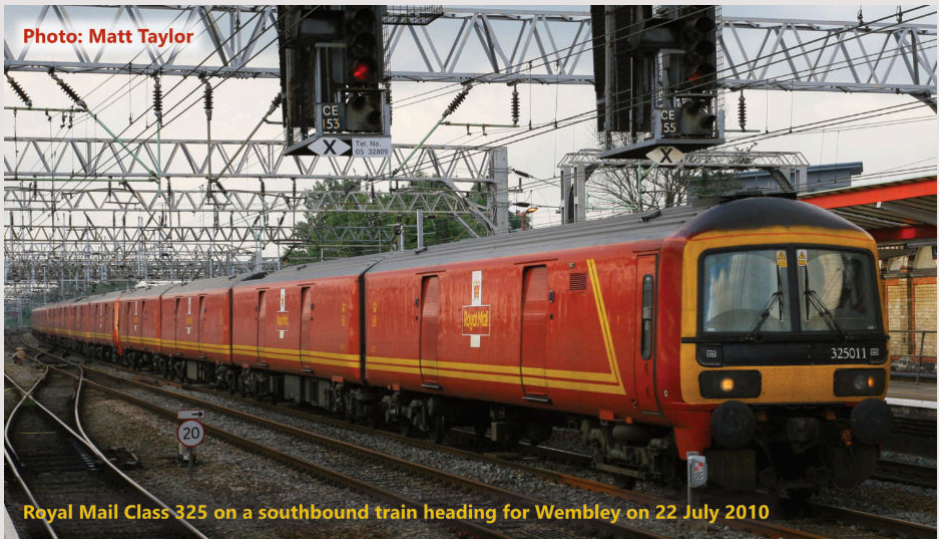


Photo: Matt Taylor

Royal Mail Class 325 on a southbound train heading for Wembley on 22 July 2010

# NEWS

## CONON BRIDGE NEW HOMES

The Highland Council has given the go-ahead to a development of 160 new homes in Conon Bridge. Since the reopening of the railway station the village has become an attractive prospect for commuters to Inverness.

## SPLIT-TICKETING

ScotRail has taken the interesting and useful step of incorporating the split-ticketing option within the booking system on its website. It has always been possible to purchase tickets this way, but it required either trial and error, or the use of a split-ticketing website.

All of this does beg the question of why it is that ScotRail doesn't just use a distance-based calculation for fares. The answer is probably to do with trying to get the most income from each route, based on demand.

## ALTNABREAC

ScotRail reports that works are underway, and consents in place, for the reopening of the troubled station by the end of September.



## FREIGHT IN THE DOLDRUMS

There have been two disappointing pieces of news on the freight front this year. In February the Scottish Government announced the abolition of its share of the UK's Mode Shift Revenue Support Scheme, putting at risk cross-border freight operations. This elicited a sharp comment from Maggie Simpson, Director General of the Rail Freight Group: "This not only leaves DfT in a difficult position, it risks the wholesale loss of traffic back to road if the grant is not sufficient to cover the financial gap. This would be a crying shame at a time when the opportunity for growth is so high, and we can only hope that sense will prevail."

In July it was revealed that there was a 20% drop in Scottish rail freight carried when comparing a period just at the outset of Covid in early 2020 to an equivalent period at the start of 2024.

## DUNROBIN CASTLE LEVEL CROSSING

Network Rail has said that people crossing the railway at Dunrobin Castle are putting themselves in danger by not following the correct procedures. There have been reports from train drivers of users not following the instructions. NR points out that trains may be travelling at 70 mph over the crossing if not required to stop at the station which is a request stop. NR is working with Sutherland Estates to ensure that guests, visitors and others using the crossing do so safely.



## KING VISITS FNL AGAIN!

Having visited Forsinard on 26 July the King was to be found on the Far North Line again on 7 August when he was invited by the Lord-Lieutenant of Sutherland, Major General Patrick Marriott, to unveil a plaque at Helmsdale Station marking the 150th Anniversary of the completion of the line from there to Thurso and Wick. He then went into the village to mark the forthcoming centenary of the Kildonan parish war memorial.

## VIEWS

### JUXTAPOSITION

Given our views on the vastly expensive and largely unnecessary dualling of the A9, which will promote modal shift away from rail and use up a large part of the Scottish Government's limited funds, Transport Scotland could have found a more tactful, and less ironic way to make this announcement!

### NEWS

#### ScotRail Peak fare removal pilot report published

Removal of ScotRail peak fares will end on 27 September

#### Full steam ahead on A9 Dualling as contractors shortlisted for next section

Next stage of the procurement process for the fourth section of the A9 Dualling programme

### JOB WELL DONE

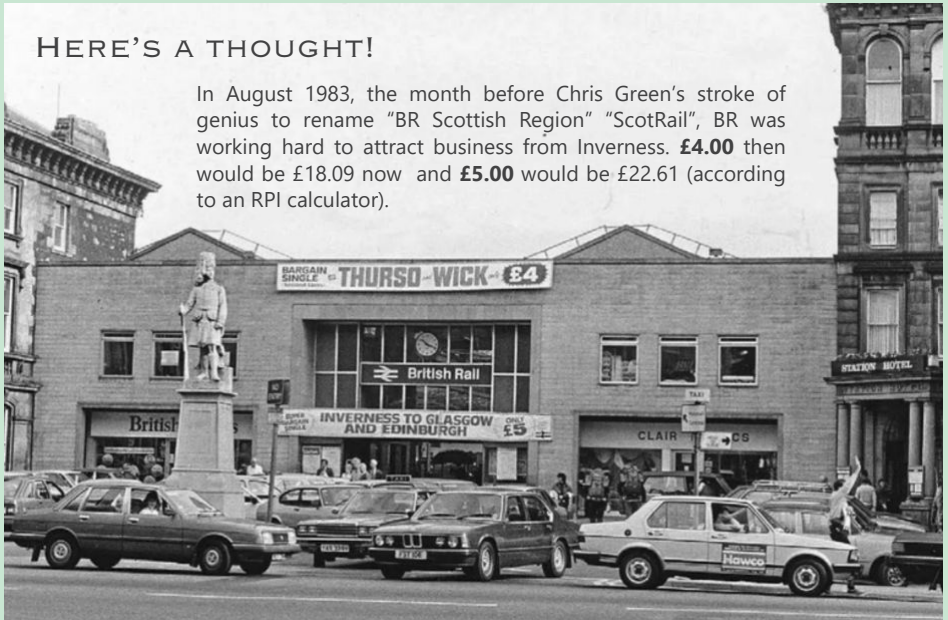
Here's a photo to celebrate a routine job beautifully done by Network Rail contractors of resurfacing and lining out the roadway over the Millburn level crossing in Inverness.

Photo: Sandy Colley



### HERE'S A THOUGHT!

In August 1983, the month before Chris Green's stroke of genius to rename "BR Scottish Region" "ScotRail", BR was working hard to attract business from Inverness. **£4.00** then would be £18.09 now and **£5.00** would be £22.61 (according to an RPI calculator).



# INTRODUCING SCOTO

Scotland's Community Tourism Network

**SCOTO** Scottish  
Community  
Tourism

*In July the ScotRail tourist officer put us in touch with **Carron Tobin** from SCOTO. After a very productive phone conversation it was clear that this venture could have relevance to the Far North Line. The news that Visit Scotland is closing all its tourist offices focuses minds on providing for the needs of tourists who have arrived and are looking for inspiration. FoFNL has wondered aloud in the past whether stations, such as Thurso and Wick could host not just a (not always open) ticket office, but some kind of 'hub' combining providing tourist information, selling train tickets and local crafts and possibly some catering. Perhaps ScotRail could work with local communities to establish such a facility.*

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

**In 2022 a new network emerged** bringing together everyone interested in seeking a more community led approach to tourism in Scotland. This is on the back of more and more communities exercising their rights to own and manage land and buildings and as a core part of this, opting to provide visitor services and facilities. 85 people across Scotland had taken part in a 12 week programme called Communities Leading in Tourism and everyone found the peer to peer learning was so valuable. Community led tourism however is not a new thing. Many local heritage centres and museums have been run by local historic societies and trusts for decades.

What has enabled this to grow is Scotland's community empowerment legislation which has led to most communities opting to set up community development trusts and many taking on the operation of local toilets, visitor information hubs and social enterprises being set up to provide hostel and pod accommodation, motorhome aires and camp sites, shops, pubs, cafes and bike hire. Some of these have proven to be lucrative with profits ploughed back into the community and others are seeking innovative ways to generate revenue to support their venture.

SCOTO has been set up to support the growth and development of community led tourism and provides various resources including case studies on [www.scoto.co.uk](http://www.scoto.co.uk) and also reaches out to visitors on [www.belocal.scot](http://www.belocal.scot) with blog features on community led tourism enterprises, a map showing where these can be found and lots of tips on how to be a temporary local on your travels. We hold an annual conference event in early Spring each year and monthly online gatherings on different topics including

tourism taxes, toilets, churches and income generation. Having established the network we are now turning our energy to shaping our strategy for community led tourism in Scotland – seeking to recalibrate tourism to deliver for our communities and the environment first.

Our network membership is open to any individual interested in the topic and we have paid categories for enterprises to access our resources and also, very importantly, supporters who want to see community led tourism flourish.

SCOTO Executive Director Carron Tobin commented "We are finding the more people we talk to, the more support there is for what we do.

"We are in a new era post-Covid and post-Brexit which has impacted on how tourism can operate. The public sector is facing significant budget constraints and as it closes toilets and visitor information centres, communities are stepping in to ensure they can offer visitors a warm welcome.

"Businesses are facing unprecedented operating costs and are struggling to recruit staff often due to a lack of affordable housing. It is critically important for business and community interests to come together and collectively agree what is and isn't working, and what could be done better or differently at a community level.

"We also know many travellers are looking to slow down, meet local people and support the community they are staying in.

"We believe it is time for everyone in the tourism industry to 'Press Pause' and explore how tourism can be recalibrated to bring added value to our people and places."

# BILBSTER FAMILY QUEST

www

**Back in February FoFNL received** a most interesting request from Steven McCluskey:

I'm hoping that you can help me trace some historical records relating to the station and station house at Bilbster 1874-1960.

I believe that my great-great-grandfather Hugh Samuel Mackenzie on my mother's side was Station Master there. There are records of him living with family around Bilbster & Wick 1878-1895 with one of his children on record as passing away in Bilbster station house in 1894.

He also lived in Dublin/Golspie/Thurso/Elgin prior to Bilbster which all have railway stations and I wonder if he was perhaps an employee of the railways in these towns.

Records including photographs would be fantastic.

My immediate thoughts were to see what I could find myself, but also to ask a friend, Stuart Gray, who does genealogical research. Stuart lived for some years in Thurso, so has good local connections, he's now a volunteer at the Scottish Railway Preservation Society in Bo'ness.

Stuart got to work straight away and produced a surprising amount of information about both Steven's great-great-grandfather Hugh MacKenzie and his great-grandfather Samuel, including a 'timeline' for Hugh MacKenzie. Steven has since added to this timeline.

- 1831 - Born in Elgin, Morayshire.
- 1849 - Enlisted in Royal Artillery.
- 1853 - 1856 Fought in Crimean War.
- 1857 (March) - Married Ellen Matthews of Guernsey, in Guernsey, Channel Islands.
- 1857 - Fought in India at time of mutiny.
- 1866 - Son - Alexander Henry MacKenzie born in England.
- 1869 - Daughter - Christina Margaret MacKenzie born in Ireland.
- 1871 - Daughter - Elizabeth Ann born in Ireland.
- 1873 (April) - Discharged from the army with a pension of £3 pounds, 8 shillings and threepence per month. (2/3d per day).
- 1873 (December) - Employed as a Railway Porter with the Highland Railway at Golspie. Son - John Findlay MacKenzie born at Golspie.
- 1876 (February) - Railway Station Master at Hoy Station. Daughter - Ellen Francis MacKenzie born at Hoy.
- 1878 - Georgemas Hotel - presentation of gold medal, silver teapot and china breakfast set to him and wife.
- 1878 - Railway Station Master at Bilbster.
- 1878 - (November) - Son - Samuel Enderby Gordon MacKenzie born at Bilbster.
- 1880 - Son - Charles Edward MacKenzie born Wick Parish.
- 1880 - (December) - Death of son Charles in Bilbster Station.
- 1881 Census - listed as a Chelsea Out Pensioner\*, and Station Master at Bilbster.
- 1882 - Son - Lewis Frederick Hugh MacKenzie born Wick Parish.
- 1894 - Death of son Alexander MacKenzie (b.1866), 12th August 1894 at Bilbster Station house.
- 1900 - Death of his wife Ellen in Cathcart (now in Glasgow).
- 1909 - Death of Hugh MacKenzie in Cathcart.

Hugh had what you could describe as a geographically diverse history. He was born in Elgin; joined the army at 16, seeing action in the Crimea and India; married a local girl in Guernsey; had a son whilst in England; then two daughters in Ireland; then four sons and a daughter in Scotland after being discharged from the army and finding work on the Highland Railway, initially as a porter at Golspie.

*[For consistency in this article I've settled on MacKenzie as the spelling - it varies!]*



Hugh became station master at Hoy in 1876, and moved to Bilbster Station along the line two years later, fairly soon after the station itself (not the station master's house) had been destroyed by fire.

His sixth child, Samuel, Steven's great-grandfather, was born in Bilbster Station house in 1878.

In his time at Hoy Hugh and his wife must have become respected figures locally, as can be seen by the newspaper report [right] of a presentation on 18th January 1878 at the Georgemas Hotel to mark their departure.

Their son Samuel moved to Cathcart, now in Glasgow, around 1900 where he is recorded on his marriage certificate as being a Railway Signalman, and retired as a Railway Goods guard in Glasgow early 1940s. He died in 1945.

[Top left] Hugh & Ellen MacKenzie, date unknown.

[Centre] A classic Victorian formal photograph of Hugh's son Samuel, taken in February 1896 when he was 18 years old. *Courtesy of Wick Society Johnston Collection.*

[Top right] A later picture of Samuel in railway uniform.



## GEORGMAS

On Friday evening, Mr and Mrs McKenzie of Bilbster Railway Station, were entertained to tea by a number of friends at the Georgemas Hotel for the purpose of presenting them with a memorial of the respect and esteem in which they were held when at Hoy Station. Mr Walter Sinclair presided. The presentation was made by Mr A. Clyne, Hoy, and consisted of a gold medal bearing a suitable inscription to Mr Mackenzie and a china breakfast set and a handsome silver teapot to Mrs Mackenzie, which he asked them to receive as a sincere expression of the esteem and respect in which they were held while in the Hoy district. In reply, Mr Mackenzie said - Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I feel highly honoured by the handsome presents which have been so kindly presented to me and Mrs Mackenzie this evening. It is not the value of the articles I prize most, but the honour of receiving such from my many friends and well wishers, and I know that Mrs Mackenzie shares the same feelings and in thanking you for all your kind remembrance, I assure you that we shall never forget the kind friends we have met at Hoy. Mr George Sutherland, Pultneytown, supplied the medal, which was a superior piece of workmanship. Mr Mackenzie served in the army before entering railway service. He enlisted in Elgin in 1849 in the Royal Regiment of Artillery, served with the army in the east and was present all through the Crimea, at Alma, Inkerman, and the siege and capture of Sebastopol. When the mutiny broke out in India in 1857 he volunteered his services and joined Col. S.E.Gordon's battery, was at the retaking of Cawnpore, and in several engagements with the Sepoys. He has three war medals and clasps and a good conduct medal. He was discharged in April, 1873, with a quartermaster sergeant's pension of 2s 3d per day.

Photo provided by Am Baile

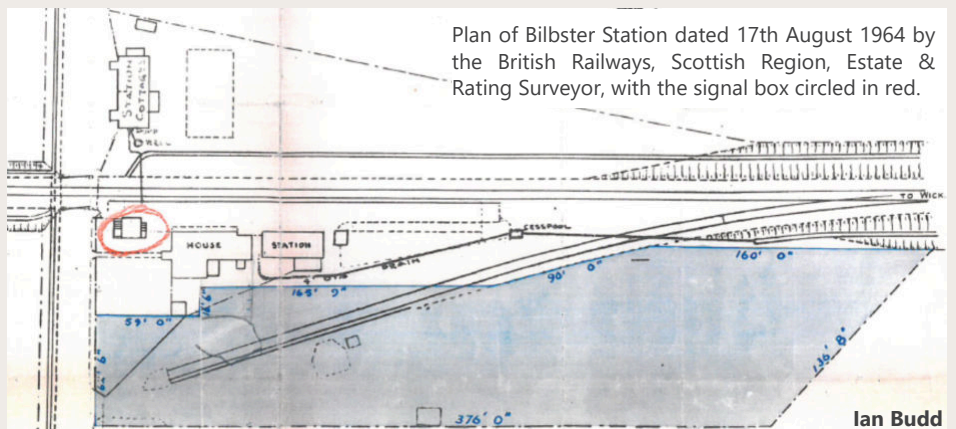


[Left] Bilbster Station, with the station house in the foreground, taken after the station had closed and the signal box beside the level crossing gate had been demolished.



Stuart also got in touch with a Bilbster farmer he knows, who has a keen interest in the local railway. He sent Stuart photos of various memorabilia he had collected from the station including a set of keys and numerous goods labels from the LMS, LNER and Manchester Ship Canal Co.

The goods sidings seen in the plan below had been well used.



Plan of Bilbster Station dated 17th August 1964 by the British Railways, Scottish Region, Estate & Rating Surveyor, with the signal box circled in red.

Ian Budd

# WORLD HERITAGE SITE



**As the Flow Country website** proudly declares on its landing page:

"The First Peatland World Heritage Site - the most intact and extensive blanket bog system in the world, stretching across Caithness and Sutherland in the far north of Scotland."

On July 26th 2024, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee inscribed the Flow Country as a World Heritage Site, and on the 31st July the King made the first of his two visits to the Far North Line this year, arriving at Forsinard to mark the wonderful achievement of UNESCO recognition.

With the RSPB Forsinard Flows Visitor Centre being situated in the old station building, the FNL is ideally placed to transport visitors to the site in the best possible way.

As the website says, "One of Britain's most impressive railway journeys crosses the heart of the Flow Country. The Far North Line runs from Inverness to Wick and Thurso, passing dramatic coastline, peat-brown rivers, and some tiny stations that serve just a couple of houses."

Let's hope that ScotRail capitalises fully on this opportunity, backed by the Scottish Government realising that investment is needed on all the Highland railways to provide the capacity to enable attractively timed and reliable services to transport visitors to Forsinard.

**Ian Budd**

Couldn't be more convenient!

[www](http://www.railscotland.gov.uk)



# BOOK REVIEWS

www

## *Completing the Far North Line*

Keith Fenwick, Highland Railway Society, 2024

ISBN: 978-0-9927311-5-1

Softback: 128pp, 176 x 250 mm. **£12.00 (£6.00 to HRS members)**  
+£2.00 p+p. See <http://hrsoc.org.uk/Publications.html>

Those of us who never miss an opportunity to add another book about Highland railways, and especially the Far North Line, will be delighted to find Keith Fenwick's latest volume.

*Completing the Far North Line* was written to mark this year's 150th anniversary of the opening of the final section of the line from Helmsdale to Wick and Thurso.

The first five chapters cover the process of railway construction north from Bonar Bridge (now Ardgay) which had been reached in 1864. The story picks up from where Mr Fenwick left it in his earlier book *Inverness & Ross-shire Railway*.

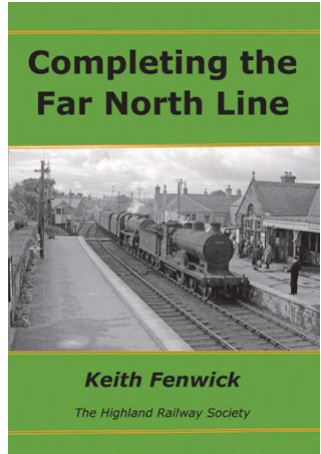
Every aspect of building a railway is covered in fascinating detail, with many photographs, maps and useful illustrations. The topographical problems encountered are laid out, including diagrams showing just how difficult it was to establish the route of the line.

Reading the story of the railway again it seems all the more remarkable that this, perhaps unlikely, project relied so much upon the financial support of one person, the 3rd Duke of Sutherland.

Having described the building of the line, the main part of the book covers its history once opened, a tour of the line itself, with many interesting photographs, a detailed description of the operation of the line, and a brief summary of its financial performance.

*Completing the Far North Line* is an essential addition to every railway bookshelf and would also be much enjoyed by everyone interested in the history of this part of Scotland which is so intertwined with the railway. It is everything a good railway book should be.

I.B.



## *How Levenmouth Got Its Trains Back*

David Spaven, Levenmouth Rail Campaign, 2024

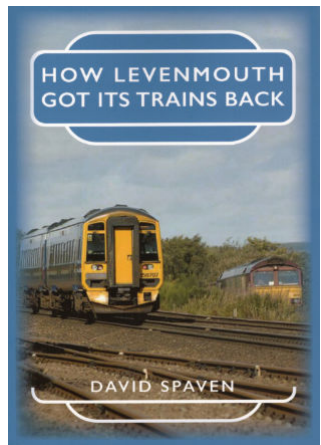
Softback: 116pp, 148 x 210 mm

<https://levenmouth.co.uk/>

The reopening of the Leven branch in June this year is a great campaigning success story. David Spaven's book, written specially for the occasion of the reopening, covers the history of the line, the context for its closure and the almost immediate call for its reopening which followed. The final, successful campaign was orchestrated by the Levenmouth Rail Campaign (LMRC), which was formed in 2014 and this book shows how persistence can overcome high-level reluctance to understand the need an area such as Levenmouth has for a rail link and to be accurate about its cost.

All rail campaigners should read this book!

I.B.



# THE ENDS

150 years on...

Sunday service ticking over at Wick as it awaits departure for Thurso, then on to Inverness, on 7 July 2024.

Photo: Colin Alston

Thurso, the furthest north you can get by rail in Scotland.

FoFNL Collection

