

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

Issue 94
January 2025



THE MAGAZINE OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

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Front cover: 07:00 to Wick awaiting departure from Inverness on 16 February 2023. **Roger French**

Rear cover: For large versions of **Niall Laybourne's** photos along with the captions, see our companion web page.

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

RAIL SERVICES DECARBONISATION ACTION PLAN

Well hidden in the pre-Christmas rush, the startling news came that the Scottish Government's 2035 rail decarbonisation target is to be extended by 10 years.

Announcing the extension on 17 December, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Fiona Hyslop, explained that the reasons were firstly a lack of money, and secondly that passenger disruption needs to be minimised so the electrification projects must be spread over a longer period - the truth is the money is being spent elsewhere.

The Scottish Government's financial arrangements are extremely unusual, perhaps unique for a country's government, relying on a calculated block grant from the UK Government, over which it has no control, and having very limited powers of borrowing for capital projects. It has to 'live within its means' in a way other governments don't. This resembles household budgeting, but with a rule that you can't take out a loan to buy a house, or a car.

Unfortunately, politicians' instinctive desire to hide unpalatable facts from the electorate means that the announcement made no mention of the impact of spending at least £5,000m on unnecessary road widening in the Highlands on the availability of funds to do essential railway infrastructure upgrades.

There may however be a silver lining here. The unrealistic targets set in the past for 'decarbonisation' seemed to be causing a headlong rush to electrify the single track intercity routes *before* providing them with the essential capacity enhancements to achieve the government's modal shift policy, and to establish enough capacity for the diversions which are inevitable whilst electrifying.

Perhaps the ten-year extension will allow for this to be done first on all the Highland railway routes, to enable the running of the kind of services people will actually forsake their cars to use.

The news in September that HST replacement

units are to be procured can now be seen in this new context. All the trains operating the Highland services to/from Inverness need to be replaced very soon, and if this means secondhand, but comfortable, diesel units on the intercity routes and the FNL and Kyle Line, no-one will mind.

At present many people simply choose to drive, and the recent shockingly bad performance of the FNL is a good example of why. The government needs to prioritise tackling the causes of this: it must provide the necessary capacity and source reliable rolling stock, it must also concentrate on removing the 'voluntary' element of train crew provision as soon as possible.

Once that is all done, electrifying makes sense as by far the best way to use energy to run trains. Fortunately using diesel trains in the meantime makes a minuscule contribution to Scottish CO₂ transport emissions, so there's no rush.

GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS

Now that the new UK Government has settled in, the plans for Great Britain's railways are coming a little more into focus. In this issue you can read Lord Henty's thoughts, as well as those of Louise Haigh, UK's previous Transport Secretary.

Of course, if you plan to completely unify the UK railway system and run it from Derby, it is all in Great Britain (apart from the Isle of Wight railway). So what are the plans for ScotRail?

Reading the Great British Railways Transition Team website we find:

National & Regional Partnerships

Delivering better for Britain's nations and regions

The legislative changes planned for rail and devolution play a significant role in delivering the UK Government's growth mission. This includes giving leaders in our nations and regions enhanced powers over local transport networks.

And further down:

Scotland

Scotland is a devolved nation, with Scottish

government providing the funding framework and the specification of passenger train services.

We are focused on developing and aligning a proposal that will meet Transport Scotland's objectives to deliver a safe, punctual railway with improved capacity whilst delivering environmental benefits by cutting carbon emissions. We are also mindful that we need to improve efficiency and deliver value for money for the taxpayer.

Given that around half of Scotland's voting age population would like independence, and a large percentage of the other half are still proud of Scotland's separate character and culture, replacing the ScotRail branding with GBR might not be a clever move, although I suppose it might be useful for diverting blame when things go wrong.

The *Williams Plan For Rail* says:

"There will be a new brand and identity for the whole system, built upon the double arrow, with national and regional sub-identities."

Wondering about this, I wrote to Roger Ford, Industry and Technology Editor of *Modern Railways* magazine to find out his thoughts about how Scotland's railway will fit into GBR. His reply confirmed my suspicions:

"My working assumption is that it will be, in effect, Great English Railways and the devolved nations will do their own (similar) thing."

"There is talk of a common GBR brand, but even this is subject to the caveat 'we hope that Scotland & Wales will choose to adopt it' (fat chance in my view)."

Finally, there is the Network Rail question. For years the Scottish Government has been trying to persuade the UK government that the (already virtually autonomous) Network Rail Scotland Route be transferred to Scottish Government control. This has been refused, perhaps because of not wishing to be seen to contribute to greater independence for Scotland.

Ian Budd

HST REPLACEMENT

It will be interesting to see what comes from the ministerial announcement in September that the 17C HST fleet is to be replaced.

Modern Railways magazine considers it likely that Transport Scotland and ScotRail will consider acquiring the Class 222 *Meridian* fleet which is currently operated by East Midlands Railway and is due to be replaced by Hitachi Class 810 bi-mode units.

These trains, built between 2003 and 2005 by Bombardier, are currently in 5- and 7-car sets and replaced HSTs on the Midland Main Line, cutting the journey time between London and Sheffield by 12 mins as these units have better acceleration than the HSTs they replaced. Given the short 17C formations they might not offer such a noticeable improvement over ScotRail's HSTs.



Photos: Wikipedia

The HST fleet has proved expensive to run, as well as having some reliability issues. With "decarbonisation" still planned for 2035 it would be nearly 60 years old by then, and with rolling stock procurement taking many years and being very expensive an interim solution does seem likely.

As always, Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government do not reveal details of plans, so guesswork remains. Whatever rolling stock is procured it must be at least as comfortable as the 17C MkIII carriages.

[WWW](#)

FoFNL AGM & CONFERENCE

[WWW](#)

Having heard a rumour that the FNL was to be closed in June we received this from Network Rail:
"The line closures are due to two lengthy disruptive possessions. One is between Helmsdale and Georgemas, Sunday 08 June 23:10 to Monday 30 June 06:15 inclusive. The other is between Rogart and Helmsdale, Monday 09 June 01:20 to Monday 30 June 05:00 inclusive."

For the duration of the works replacement bus services will be in place between Inverness and Wick
We've not been able to discover the nature of the work being done, but track renewal seems likely.

This has meant that our AGM will now take place on **Friday 4 July from 12:00-15:30**. The venue will be the **Norseman Hotel, Wick**. Full details will be posted on our website and Facebook Page.

TICKET OFFICE HOURS

At the end of October ScotRail announced changes to ticket office hours at 66 stations. 12 will see increased hours and 54 will see reductions.

The decision has been made because of the high uptake of online ticket sales, especially using the mobile app. This is unsurprising as, if you have the equipment and are comfortable using it, it's the easiest way to buy tickets (as long as your phone doesn't fail *en route*.)

The ScotRail website explains that:

- 16% of sales are via ticket offices. 90% of those sales are from just 20 stations.
- 20% of sales are via ticket vending machines (TVMs) at stations.
- 43% of tickets are online, through the website or the app.

and says that the benefits of the changes include:

- There will be no job losses or redundancies as a result of these proposals.
- Where ticket offices see reduced hours, staff will carry out other customer supporting duties within their existing job description, such as ticket barrier duties and revenue protection.
- Customers will benefit from increased staff visibility, helping with ticket selling/inspection and tackling anti-social behaviour.
- Customers will receive improved support through platform Help Points, with advice available on buying tickets.

This is a complicated, and sometimes emotive issue. ScotRail's announcement had a quote from Phil Campbell, Customer Operations Director, who said, "The independent passenger watchdog Transport Focus carried out an extensive consultation on these proposals, which received feedback from thousands of people across Scotland. We have listened to our customers and updated our proposals based on that feedback.

"These changes will provide a service that is better suited for today and the ticket-buying habits of our customers, as well as create an environment that improves safety and customer support."

We will watch what happens at Dingwall and Wick with interest.

	Current		From 2025			
	Mon-Sat	Sun	Mon-Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Dingwall	07:30-14:34	Closed	10:45-12:45	10:15-12:00	10:30-13:30	Closed
Wick	10:10-17:14	Closed	07:50-13:30	07:50-13:30	Closed	Closed

FOFNL COMMITTEE

Report of FoFNL Committee Meeting on 16 September 2024

Held online by Zoom

Present: Ian Budd (Convener), Iain MacDonald, Richard Mansfield, and Neil Wallace (Secretary).

Apologies: David Start (Treasurer), Angus Stewart (Membership), Les Turner, Malcolm Wood

Finance report

David Start presented his report - details will be circulated for the 2025 AGM.

Membership report

Membership numbers had risen to 253.

Meetings update

Ian Budd and Richard Ardern had met with Transport Minister, Fiona Hyslop, at Holyrood. The unfavourable financial position had resulted in several FNL improvements being put on hold, including the overdue construction of a passing loop at Delmore and the provision of electrified points at key locations.

Discussions held jointly with SAPT and Transport Scotland on procurement of new rolling stock were subject to similar setbacks, although it was recognised that main line HST units would need to be replaced sooner rather than later.

FNL 150th anniversary in July 2024

A photographic exhibition was scheduled for 16-19 October at the North Coast Visitor Centre, Thurso. A plaque would be unveiled at Wick Station on a later date.

Altnabreac Station temporary closure

ScotRail were not yet able to provide a firm date for re-opening, pending resolution of an access dispute which was disrupting planned maintenance operations.

Freight Possibilities

Comments had been received from Les Turner regarding the issues relevant to Delmore loop, also on the lack of availability of suitable wagons to move timber on the FNL.

FoFNL future planning

Discussion on succession planning and the need to recruit new committee members.

Neil Wallace, *Secretary*

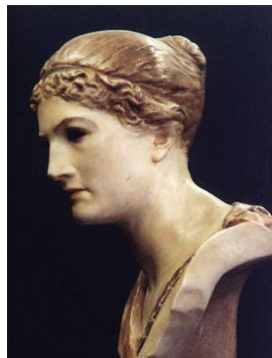
FOFNL ACTIVITY IN 2024

During the course of the year, in addition to the meeting mentioned above with **Fiona Hyslop**, meetings took place with **Mark Ilderton**, ScotRail Service Delivery Director, for general discussion; **Louise Shaw** from Transport Scotland and **Jon Newton** from Scottish Rail Holdings about rolling stock procurement (joint attendance with SAPT); online meetings with **Jamie Stone M.P.** and **Alan Ross**, Director Engineering and Asset Management, Network Rail.

Talks about FoFNL were given to **CRAG** (Capital Rail Action Group [Edinburgh]) and **RAGES** (Rail Action Group East of Scotland).

FoFNL is represented on the **Caithness Transport Forum** and the Holyrood **Cross Party Group for Sustainable Transport**.

CASSANDRA



The collision – luckily at a low speed – between two Class 158s in Wales in October made Cassandra sit up and think. In *RAIL* 1021, published a week later, a senior railwayman said this:

"What's important now is that we understand exactly what caused this incident, so that we can make sure that nothing like it happens again."

To Cassandra's mind there is no doubt about the cause of the accident, given that it happened deep in the countryside in late October. Trees. And making sure that it doesn't happen again is also simple to say, if time-consuming and not without controversy. Cut them down.

When Cassandra's mother was small there was a shallow embankment nearby to which she and her pals would go with a tray and slide down. Occasionally there was great glee when the cry "Fire on the bankie" went up. Sparks had lit the grass. Naturally, this being Scotland, and the bank being pretty small, the fire soon went out and downhill sliding was resumed. No nasty spark-producing engines now, and consequently lots of tree seedlings are no longer burnt, inevitably meaning lots of trees. (A bank from which Cassandra train-spotted – grass then – is now thickly wooded nearly 70 years later.)

But chopping down trees is wanton: global warming and all that. So for every tree chopped down two should be planted, but planted somewhere at least 100 metres from a railway line. Who pays? Network Rail in the first instance should immediately draw up plans to remove every tree within their boundary within, say, five years. They know where autumn wheel-slip is worst: that's where they start. Network Rail's PR chaps must think out a way of harnessing volunteers – schools would be a good place to start as young people seem to be pretty engaged with global warming – to plant young trees then. Who pays? Cassandra doesn't know, but is aware that if no-one pays then there will be more train crashes in autumn, and that means reputational risk as well as the high probability that one of these predictable events will lead to much heavier loss of life.

Pandora wrote about this in *FNE 85* in February 2022 following almost exactly the same incident near Salisbury. Nothing has happened. Cassandra isn't about to rush out to buy shares in chainsaw companies though. And that is a pity.

On 5 November, after Cassandra had penned her piece, the Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB), the UK Government's independent body which is required by law to uncover the causes of serious rail accidents, issued its preliminary findings about this incident.

RAIB found that one of the trains was meant to stop in a passing loop to await the passing of the other, which was approaching. Normal braking was applied, but had no effect and after around 40 seconds the emergency braking system was activated. The train didn't stop in the loop and proceeded to slide downhill for around 900m before colliding with the other train, at a combined speed of between 15 and 24 mph.

RAIB found that levels of wheel/rail adhesion were low and that the braking train's automatic sanding hoses were blocked.

One passenger subsequently died and fifteen required hospital treatment.

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Question S6W-29458: Rhoda Grant, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, answered 17 September 2024

To ask the Scottish Government when the Delmore passing loop will be upgraded.

Fiona Hyslop: The advantages for capacity and performance of a new rail loop in the Delmore area are recognised. However, the proposal for a passing loop at Delmore does not feature in the Scottish Government's current investment programme.

Given the extremely challenging financial climate, and following last year's UK Autumn Statement, we have had to take difficult decisions in setting the budget for 2024-25. This affects our ability to fund any projects which do not yet feature in the current investment programme.

A loop at Delmore remains in consideration for future delivery alongside a number of other potentially valuable schemes.

Question S6W-29459: Rhoda Grant, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, answered 17 September 2024

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what plans it has to upgrade train services.

Fiona Hyslop: The Scottish Government is investing in rail services across Scotland, including the rolling programme of electrification. East Kilbride line electrification is now under way and I have recently announced that ScotRail is to procure replacement trains for the current InterCity High Speed Train fleet. The work continues to develop further procurements to replace and renew the ScotRail fleet as it ages.

Question S6W-29471: Alex Rowley, MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife, Scottish Labour, answered 17 September 2024

To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to encourage modal shift from car to rail, in light of the peak fares removal pilot ending.

Fiona Hyslop: The Scottish Government continues to be committed to finding ways to make sustainable travel modes more attractive and supporting people to take fewer journeys by car. The forthcoming route map to 20% car kilometre reduction will aim to set out our approach to support this recommendation.

Question S6W-29545: Rhoda Grant, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, answered 18 September 2024

To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its reported plans to require ScotRail to procure high-speed trains to replace the current fleet that operates on its InterCity routes between Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Inverness, what impact this will have on journey times, and whether this procurement covers improvements to rail track or is exclusive to train fleets.

Fiona Hyslop: ScotRail is to undertake the procurement exercise for the new intercity fleet. The timescales for replacement and the exact type of train to replace the HST Fleet as well as any implications of this replacement, including necessary infrastructure investments and journey times are dependent on the outcomes of the procurement.

Question S6W-29541: Liam McArthur, MSP for Orkney Islands, Scottish Liberal Democrats, answered 18 September 2024

To ask the Scottish Government when it expects the electrification of Intercity passenger routes between

Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Inverness to be complete.

Fiona Hyslop: The Scottish Government is committed to decarbonising its passenger rail network and is continuing with the rolling programme of electrification as funding permits.

This is set out in Transport Scotland's Decarbonisation Action Plan, which is planned as a dynamic document, with a refresh of the Plan underway. The refresh will examine the electrification programme, informed by progress with rolling stock procurement.

Question S6W-30002: Liam McArthur, MSP for Orkney Islands, Scottish Liberal Democrats, answered 1 October 2024

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S6W-27663 by Fiona Hyslop on 3 June 2024, whether it is committed to retaining the 2035 deadline for the removal of diesel passenger trains in any refreshed Decarbonisation Action Plan.

Fiona Hyslop: The refresh of the Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan will examine how and when the traction elements of rail transport can best be achieved. The order and programme in which decarbonisation can be achieved is and remains dependent on business cases and available budgets.

Question S6W-30003: Liam McArthur, MSP for Orkney Islands, Scottish Liberal Democrats, answered 1 October 2024

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S6W-29541 by Fiona Hyslop on 18 September 2024, when it expects the present refresh of the Decarbonisation Action Plan to be concluded.

Fiona Hyslop: A refresh of the Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan, informed by current progress with rolling stock procurement, is currently expected to conclude in early 2025.

DISCONTINUOUS ELECTRIFICATION

Its willingness to spend money on roads rather than railways may prompt Transport Scotland to consider discontinuous electrification, allowing BEMUs to provide intercity services. This may prove to be a useful 'stopgap' solution, but carrying heavy battery equipment is hardly a sensible use of scarce resources.

A Hitachi Class 802 unit had one of its diesel generators replaced temporarily with a 700kW battery. It was able to run on battery alone for 70km and achieved 140km/h (87 mph).

It is important that this promising news on progress with intercity battery trials doesn't tempt the cash strapped Rail Directorate to consider discontinuous electrification to be the answer to financial constraints.

TransPennine Express unit 802 207, which hosted the battery trial, passing through Musselburgh on 28 September 2020.

Photo: Raymond Platt



THE CASE OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

WWW

In 2023 FoFNL started to look for a way to sponsor some useful research by linking up with a university. Sharing the idea with Catherine Hall, Network Rail's Head of Strategic Planning, Scotland, a plan was drawn up to have some field research done to gather opinions from a wide range of people who *could* use the Far North Line, but choose not to.

The Department of Marketing at Strathclyde University seemed the best fit and our approach was welcomed by Professor Beverly Wagner and Dr Andrew Davis. A discussion group was formed, with the inclusion of Nicola Curran, ScotRail's Head of Commercial Revenue.

We established the requirements and briefed the university staff on the line's history and shortcomings.

Professor Wagner and Dr Davis set about the task, which included consulting appropriate stakeholders, including local communities, businesses and tourist bodies; conducting in-depth interviews with regular, infrequent, and non-users of the FNL to understand their travel motivations and barriers to travel; and field research to account for real-time behaviour, and researcher observations to understand the structure of the FNL.

The work was completed in two stages: desk research and phone interviews (April-May 2024); and field research including personal diaries and face-to-face interviews (August-September 2024).

In November the university produced its final report which is available [on our website](#).

No-one expected a magical 'silver bullet' to be conjured up by this investigation. What we have is simultaneously very encouraging and familiarly depressing - encouraging because what came through very clearly was the recognition by travellers, non-travellers and the community at large of the value of the railway, despite its inevitably extended journey times; depressing because, as expected, the barriers to travel on the line are mostly fixable given the investment the Scottish Government is apparently not prepared to authorise.

Our hope is that this report, along with the Far

North Line Review Team's recommendations of 2019, which have not been fully realised, will spur decision makers to think hard about how far behind being a fully-functional, efficient, reliable railway the FNL has fallen.

In Victorian times, when a clear need was identified it was someone's responsibility to have that attended to (only of course if the private enterprise railway company concerned had any money available). Today's attitude to capital projects, with the constant fear of being accused of mis-spending public money, has resulted in a risk-averse morass of procedures, so that every project, even the installation of an essential passing loop, has to go through a complicated, time consuming, expensive process to attempt to produce a 'business case'.

Checking the Scottish Government's current advice on how to proceed with this (*Guidance on the Development of Business Cases in Transport Scotland* - 2015) does uncover the stated need to "optimise value for money in terms of economic, social and environmental benefit". In parts of Scotland with far fewer residents this is the key.

The Fairer Scotland Duty, which is Part 1 of the Equality Act 2010, came into force in 2018 and requires public sector bodies to "actively consider how they can reduce inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage, when making strategic decisions".

Residents of Caithness and points south surely have as much right to a reliable, regular and sensibly frequent train service as those of the Central Belt.

The report also identifies possibilities of linking the FNL with activities, such as the Northern Pilgrim's Way, raising awareness of ways the line can be used. This is something which our colleagues at the newly-formed Far North Line Community Rail Partnership are well aware of. The Strathclyde University team describes such linkages as "low-hanging fruit" and is willing to be part of discussions in the future which could involve FoFNL, FNLCRP and, for example, ScotRail's Tourism Manager.

Ian Budd

HIGHLAND COUNCIL PASSES RAIL MOTION



At an all day meeting of the full Highland Council on 12 December one of the items on the agenda was a motion signed by Cllr Trish Robertson and nine other councillors:

For debate on 12-12-24

As we continue to look at public transport options to address Climate Change it is time we considered trains.

Promises made over the years have not been fulfilled. The Far North Line takes up to 40 minutes longer than it did in 2000. If running late this service can be held for 40 minutes at Muir of Ord.

Highland Main Line services to Edinburgh and Glasgow no longer arrive to suit the working day- a service that was introduced in 2000 to aid business.

Transferring waste services to rail will affect capacity on the line. Inverness to Aberdeen improvements to reduce travel time to 2 hours have not been completed.

The Highlands must have fit for purpose railway connections if we are to reduce the number of vehicles on our roads - rail services that enable our business community to be connected to wider markets.

As a council we must become more vocal to ensure we have connections suitable for the economic changes we anticipate as the Green Freeport and all associated business comes to Highland.

I seek support for a discussion session with all interested parties to ensure we bring these issues to the fore.

Signed: Mrs T Robertson Mr A Graham Mrs J McEwan Mr J Grafton
Mr D Gregg Mr M Baird Mrs A MacLean Mr J Edmondson
Ms M MacCallum Mr R Gunn

Listening to the points raised in support of this motion was a reassuring experience. It is clear that many councillors recognise that the region is lucky to have its railways, but that they are seriously lacking in terms of infrastructure, quality of trains and paucity of catering and toilet facilities. The punctuality issue, caused by the lack of sufficient passing places, was at the heart of many comments. The Far North Line in particular was referred to repeatedly as a missed tourism opportunity and an unreliable service for such important needs as attending hospital appointments.

The speakers supported the motion and agreed that The Highland Council needs to be more vocal in raising the issues with the rail industry and the Scottish Government.

No-one spoke against, and the motion was carried.

This is an important step forward, we hope now to see The Highland Council actively putting the case for investment and helping in whatever ways it can to enable a better Highland railway network.

We hope in the meantime that every effort will be made to assist with modal shift to rail when contracts are being let for services such as moving waste to recycling plants. Of course, the present lack of capacity on the Highland railways mitigates against this being possible - something the Scottish Government must address urgently.

Ian Budd

MALCOLM G. WOOD

Sad news arrived on 14 November that Malcolm George Wood, one of our committee members passed away that day. Malcolm had been ill for quite a long time but was indomitable, and would always attend committee meetings and our AGMs despite the struggle.

Malcolm was our Secretary for several years and during this time made a great contribution to our work. He took it upon himself to record late-running and cancellations on the Far North Line, plus the *Caledonian Sleeper* and *The Highland Chieftain*. He began this in October 2016 and sent in a massive 176 weekly reports until lockdown in March 2020 when there seemed no point in continuing, with the much-reduced service and almost no passengers.

Malcolm's own words, written on request when he became our Secretary in 2014, describe his unusual and many-faceted life far better than we could:



I've been asked to write a bit about myself. I've tried to condense it. Honestly!

I was born and brought up in Gateshead, County Durham, grandson of an engine driver! I trainspotted a bit in my teens - mostly locally, at Low Fell Station and trips to Heaton Sheds. I really was more of a bus geek privately, but as there was no internet and I had never met anyone else in the world who was the least bit interested in buses, I decided that this was best kept to myself.

I graduated from the Royal Manchester College of Music as a Singer and Pianist and began teaching in Lancashire. I had not been your typical music student. I threw myself into the life of the University Chaplaincy Centre and also became very involved with the British Council, organising activities for the astonishingly high percentage of overseas students in the Manchester area.

From the age of 12, I had been introduced to the Scottish Schoolboys' Club and attended my first annual summer camp at Bruar in 1962. I do remember that my (cardboard) railway ticket said "Newcastle-upon-Tyne Central to Struan via Glenfarg." Well, by 1973 I was still going to Bruar and many other activities too as a voluntary Officer in the SSC, which employed one full-time person as National Organiser. This position became vacant and I applied and got the job, based in Edinburgh. Music teaching was "on hold". The next five years were probably the best in my life.

There were a lot of "unsocial hours" but as well as doing the youth development, the massive amount of admin and the mechanical engineering which goes with keeping 350 people fed and watered for 4 weeks in a field without electricity, I found time to sing in St Giles' Cathedral Choir, Scottish Opera Professional Chorus and do quite a bit of solo work, mainly with amateur operatics but also some with the BBC.

However, I knew that I had no paper qualifications in youth work or admin so after 5 years I got back into teaching and landed a job at Inverness Royal Academy which then had a huge academic 5th and 6th form as there were so many remote parts of the mainland (and also several islands which were part of Invernessshire) where the Secondary Schools only taught up to 4th year. If you were bright and you lived in one of these places, you transferred to Inverness and stayed in the Hostel. The pupils from Barra only got home once per term.

As well as all the extra-curricular music activities at IRA, I was recruited to help Charlie Bannerman with athletics and cross-country. Two nights a week after school I donned my singlet and shorts and led all the mobility warm-ups and then took all the distance runners out into the hills while the two

other staff dealt with the sprinters and hurdlers. Cross-country fixtures were dawn till dusk affairs on Saturdays, often involving three hours in a coach to somewhere like Thurso or Fort William or Banff and then standing around on a bleak headland for hours, marshalling the race with nothing between the fillings in your teeth and the North Pole. We all loved it!

The quality of life in Inverness was excellent, but promoted posts scarce, so after 3 years I reluctantly returned to Edinburgh where I spent the next 10 years as Head of Music at Tynecastle High School. You name it, I did it. Oh yes - including the Cross Country teams, who won some prestigious silverware.

Then, being me, I worried about getting stale, so I resigned and bought the Co-op Stores and Post Office at Kinloch Rannoch! So for most of the 90's I was an Independent Licensed Grocer and Subpostmaster, bringing my own brand of entrepreneurial skills and an unequalled selection of chocolate biscuits to Highland Perthshire.

After selling up the shop, I became expert at making a living out of supply teaching and eventually moved back to Edinburgh. After several years I was drawn back in to a permanent post - at Dunblane High School, and then in St Andrew's High School, Kirkcaldy. Because I had had a break from teaching and because I wasn't in a promoted post, with all the politics that that entails, I really enjoyed teaching right up to my retirement.

I've absolutely no regrets about any of the bizarre twists and turns I've allowed my life to take. Things are much less hectic nowadays and I've much enjoyed the welcome extended to me by FoFNL.

See this issue's companion web page for an example of Malcolm's work for FoFNL .

[www](#)

JOHN ALLISON

Too late for inclusion in the September edition of Far North Express we heard that John Allison, who had significant involvement with the Far North Line, had passed away in June. John Yellowlees has written a tribute to John.

John Allison successfully made the transition from Law and Administration roles at Comhairle nan Eilean, Sutherland District Council - where he was its last chief executive - and from 1996 the new Highland Council to a mission in supporting his first love, the railways, which also found expression in modelling and his involvement in the Highland Railway Society.

As secretary of the Highland Rail Partnership at the right hand of such notable chairs as John Farquhar Munro and Charlie King, he worked with rail development manager Frank Roach on such notable causes as the reopening of Beaulay Station, introduction of all-year Sunday trains and tailoring of cascaded Class 158 trains to the needs of the Highlands.

A diabetic, he rightly reminded ScotRail of the need to make suitable provision on its catering trolleys. Retiring to his native Ayrshire, he did not allow deteriorating eyesight to prevent his interest in the railways, and served from 2007 as secretary of the Highland Railway Society, continuing on its committee until 2016.

John's Christmas card was often the first to arrive, containing a handwritten account of his family news which culminated last year in the passing of his beloved Shirley. I last saw him a few years ago, when I had the pleasure of showing him round the newly reinvigorated station in his home-town of Kilmarnock.



John Yellowlees

HIGH-SPEED INTERNET ON TRAINS



SCOTTISH
FUTURES
TRUST

THE CLARUS
NETWORKS GROUP

A Class 158 in classic 'no signal' territory. This was photographed by Niall Laybourne near Kinbrace.

This is a hot topic, and we're all waiting for news...

Since listening to Dr Robert Gardner at our AGM excitement has been mounting. It's good to know that work on technical approval to certify Starlink to rigorous rail standards- EN50155, EN50121, and EN45545, is well underway. Installation and testing on the first Class 158 unit follows. Once complete, the system can be deployed to the other five units involved in the test, ready for public use. In the very near future passengers on many FNL services will be enjoying faster internet speeds than they can access at home!

Clarus Networks Group, based in Bathgate, and working with ScotRail and the Scottish Futures Trust, is working on this proof-of-concept project. Railways across the UK and round the world, will be watching closely. As Clarus says, "Whether it's providing connectivity at level crossings, monitoring bridges, or supporting isolated signal boxes, Starlink offers a robust and reliable solution for maintaining communication across the entire rail network, ensuring that no critical point is left unconnected."

The transformation this technology will bring to railways in the Highlands in particular, and the rail network in general, goes far beyond the passengers' enjoyment of high-speed internet connections on trains. There are many other applications for the technology, including such vital activities as monitoring embankments for landslip in real time. By their nature the majority of track miles are not in cities and therefore has weaker communication systems, such as the mobile phone network, or physical links to the fibre-optic home and business networks. Indeed ScotRail is already using a Starlink connection to link the remote Corrou Station Help Point to the system.

Another good example of the possibilities opened up by this technology is the option to replace the current "fall-back" analogue links for the Far North Line's RETB signalling system between major nodes on the line, which are provided by the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN). This analogue system is being closed down in 2027. The option for the RETB system to transfer its fall-back links to Starlink services is likely to be far cheaper than the fibre optic PSTN replacement - a worthwhile saving on something which is only used in the unlikely event of an RETB mast losing its connection.

Ian Budd

27 YEARS OF PROGRESS

Colin Marr, Chief Executive of **Inverness Chamber of Commerce** expresses the frustration felt Highlands-wide by the chronic shortcomings in Highland rail provision, in this article in the Inverness Courier on 5 November 2024.

Last week I attended a reception at Edinburgh Castle where we heard from First Minister John Swinney. Even with the increase in online meetings there are still occasions when business is better done in person. This was such an occasion and that's a reality for everyone living and working in the Highlands - trips to the Central Belt are sometimes essential - for both

It took 49 minutes just to get to Aviemore from Inverness - a trip that can be made in 35 minutes by car. Trains are safer and a good step towards net zero. But to encourage more people to use them they need to be consistently more comfortable, have reliable power points and Wi-Fi, and a good standard of catering - my return journey failed on all three of these. They also need to be significantly faster than driving, and affordable.

My trains were both running and on time. That doesn't always happen and ScotRail has just announced that there will no trains for four weekends in a row from the middle of November. And of course, the train services north of Inverness are even worse.

The very welcome investments we'll see from the Freeport will lead to even greater pressure on our road and rail network and neither of them are coping at the moment.

The cost to business of our slow and outdated rail services is very real and to my knowledge there are no plans for serious reductions in journey times. Come on ScotRail - when are you going to take our rail services seriously?

27 years of progress has seen our trains get slower.

ScotRail - when are you going to take our rail services seriously?

business and leisure. To hear the First Minister, I travelled by train. When I moved to Inverness in 1997 that train journey normally took three hours 20 minutes. Last week each leg of my journey to Edinburgh took three hours 46 minutes. And that was with both trains running on time. Twenty-seven years of progress has seen our trains get slower. How can that be? Where is our outrage and why are we not hearing from ScotRail on a regular basis with their improvement plans?

Colin's reference to the train taking 3 hr 20 min in 1997 slightly masks the even more disappointing fact that in 2000 the outward train journey had been reduced to 3 hr 10 mins and the return to 3 hrs 15 mins.

Year		Dep.		Arr.
2000	Inverness	06:48	Edinburgh	09:58
2024	Inverness	06:38	Edinburgh	10:14
2000	Edinburgh	17:40	Inverness	20:55
2024	Edinburgh	17:33	Inverness	21:23

As the table shows, the intervening 24 years have seen 26 mins added to the southbound journey and 35 mins to the northbound. By any measure this is a fail. So much for the 2008 promise of 2 hr 45 mins best time and 3 hr average.

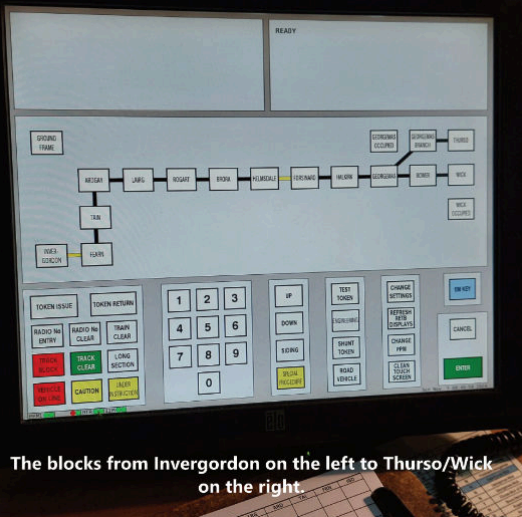
The Scottish Government needs to take almost full responsibility for this. Although ScotRail has added some minutes 'recovery time' to reduce the chance of late running, the lack of the required infrastructure is the fault of the Scottish Government and its predecessors.

INVERNESS SIGNALLING CENTRE

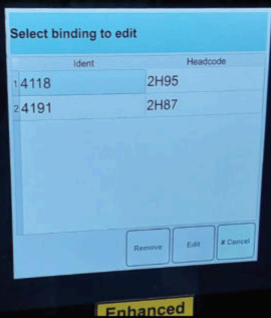


I was lucky enough to be given a quick tour of Inverness Signalling Centre on 3 November. Above is a general view of most of the control desks which the signallers use. It's remarkable that the entire Far North and Kyle Lines are controlled from here using the RETB (Radio Electronic Token Block) system.

The signallers are in verbal communication with the train drivers each time a train comes to the end of one block (section of route) and needs to enter the next. In past times each track section had one physical 'token' which was held by the train crew and handed in or collected at the



The blocks from Invergordon on the left to Thurso/Wick on the right.



At the beginning of each journey the train's unique RETB identifier (left) has to be 'bound' to the specific service it's going to run (right)

beginning/end of each single-line section. This prevented two trains at once being in the same block - essential on single-track railways to avoid head-on collisions.

In the adjoining room are racks of processing units which perform the vital task of 'interlocking' to ensure that no incorrect, and therefore dangerous, manoeuvres can take place.

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

Ian Budd

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ALTNABREAC - NOT YET...

It's difficult to know where to begin when writing about the extraordinary situation at Altnabreac Station.

FoFNL, as an independent party, not involved in any way in the drama, cannot make any definite statements about the legal situation while proceedings are taking place.

The couple who own the former station house, Ian and Elizabeth Appleby, were charged in April 2024 with various criminal offences relating to incidents at the station. Surprisingly these charges have not been taken to trial so far.



Backup power

Meanwhile, the Applebys have mounted a very public campaign on YouTube, to put what they describe as the truth in the public domain. They have also set up a GoFundMe page to raise money to cover their legal costs.

In November 2023 the organisations concerned, and several stakeholders including FoFNL, were invited to a meeting to understand the situation and to discuss how matters should proceed. Suffice to say that the background information given at that meeting was very clear and bears little resemblance to the statements made by the Applebys in their YouTube videos.

The aim of the videos is to convince viewers of the strength of their case. The content includes several discussions with rail staff and members of the British Transport Police. For us



Solar panel array to power station equipment

to be convinced we need to hear both sides of the argument clearly but this is too much for the Applebys, they just talk/shout over the visitors, presumably so we can't hear what's being said.

In conclusion it's hard to imagine how anyone buying a disused station house on a working station could possibly imagine that no railway staff or equipment would ever have to access the site. It's also very hard to understand what the Applebys are trying to achieve. Given that they use the railway themselves, keeping the station open must be important to them.

Mysteriously, all the station equipment has been cleared from the platform and placed in or behind the wooden waiting shelter which has been boarded up.

ScotRail tells us that it wishes to reopen the station as soon as possible, but to do so requires access to replace the missing equipment and install the Request to Stop kiosk. In future power will be provided by a solar array combined with storage batteries and a backup generator.

Thousands of pounds worth of equipment is currently languishing on railway premises elsewhere, waiting to be installed at the station so it can open again.



RTS kiosk outside the storage and generator facility

TRANSFORM REPORT

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

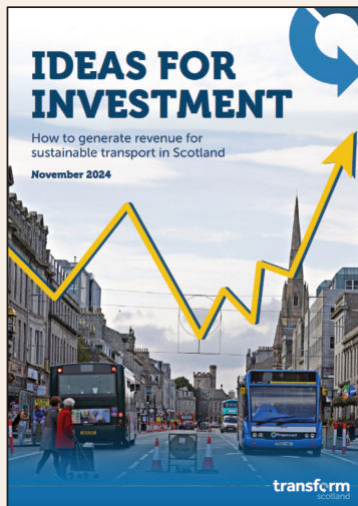
Transform Scotland (of which FoFNL is a member) published a new report in November 2024 with the tagline: "How to generate revenue for sustainable transport in Scotland". *Ideas For Investment* seeks to identify means beyond direct funding, which is in extremely short supply following the real-term reduction in Scotland's block grant, and the Scottish Government's severe limitations on borrowing for capital projects.

The report was followed by a webinar with three speakers:

- Dr Karen Barrass on climate bonds
- Sue Flack on innovative parking strategies
- Dr George Hazel on land value capture

The talk by Dr Hazel was especially relevant to railway projects and demands both our attention and that of The Highland Council, as well as the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland.

Dr Hazel described how his organisation, E-Rail, of which he is a Director, promotes Land Value Capture (LVC) which was deployed successfully in the Northumberland Line Project. This saw Contribution Agreements executed with landowners on 21 sites and raised an estimated £30m -



£40m towards the capital cost of the project. The 18 mile line was still in use for freight and now has six stations.

Put simply, LVC identifies the likely increase in land values near the project once it is completed, and agrees with developers a contribution of around 50% of that increase.

From our perspective we can see that opening a station would increase the potential value of nearby land for house building and/or commercial or industrial use.

In terms of land values the cost of building a station is relatively small, despite Network Rail's reputation for surprisingly high price tags. There may be opportunities on the Far North Line for LVC - reopening Evanton Station



springs to mind. Perhaps there will also be opportunities to deploy LVC as part of the future Inverness Station redevelopment.

The report is well worth a read in its entirety, and can be found on our website at www.fofnl.org.uk/docs/transform-scotland/Ideas-for-Investment-Transform-Scotland-November-2024.pdf

The slides from the webinar are at www.fofnl.org.uk/images/slides/Ideas-for-Investment.pdf

Ian Budd

PRESS AND RAILWAYS

It's amazing that even in these times when most people realise that it is important to persuade travellers to use the train whenever possible, rather than automatically driving, the press often falls back on well-worn tropes of criticising, or laughing at, the rail system, without making the obvious points about how it could be fixed.

Apparently this kind of commentary doesn't extend to coverage of road projects. A typical press feature on that subject will be campaigning to get vast amounts of the transport budget spent on dualling existing roads using hyperbole and dubious statistics to try and force the government to act.

If only newspaper editors would step back from thoughtlessly following a kind of 'herd mentality' and actually analyse the needs and sensible solutions to both road and rail questions.

A classic pointless piece about delays on the Inverness-Aberdeen railway was published in the *Press and Journal* on 2 November. It reeled off a load of figures for delays and cancellations with no attempt to explain why these occur and what needs to be done about it. Reading this prompted a response which, to its credit, the *P&J* did print:

Sir:- "715 train journeys connecting cities hit snags in a year" (*P&J* 02 Nov 24) is one of the most pointless articles I've read in a long time. It would have had a purpose if it had attempted to explain why rail delays happen, and what can be done to avoid them.

All three Highland lines radiating from Inverness have the same problem - they are mostly single track with a few passing places. This situation amplifies any delay and virtually guarantees that the lateness of one train will be passed on to trains coming in the opposite direction which languish in the passing loops, becoming late themselves.

It's not acceptable to allow politicians to continue to ignore this situation when Scottish Government policy is to achieve major modal shift away from roads.

It's high time the *Press and Journal* used its considerable transport campaigning prowess, as it has done with the A9 dualling, to highlight the issue of single track inter-city and long-distance railways to persuade the government to solve the problem.

Ian Budd - Convener, Friends of the Far North Line

Newspaper articles moaning about statistics produces nothing, except a general perception that railways don't work. The Scottish Government needs to be convinced to act on the lack of infrastructure which bedevils all the railway routes out of Inverness. The government has allowed them to languish as mostly single-track for far too long.

In the last decade some serious money *has* been spent on Stage 1 of Inverness-Aberdeen improvements - no sign of further stages as yet - and a small amount of money *was* spent on improving two passing loops on the Highland Main Line, but to save money the original plans for that were watered down so that full-length freight trains still cannot pass at these points.

It would be wonderful to see newspapers taking up the case for Highland rail investment with the same vigour and passion they have shown for dualling the two major roads - instead of just complaining.

An exception to those observations is the *Inverness Courier*, which does take the trouble to find out why there are problems and to suggest solutions.

This paper, and its stablemates at Highland News & Media, have been particularly supportive of our attempts to achieve some movement towards investment in the Far North Line. Here is an excerpt from an article entitled *Vital rail loop in 'limbo'* by Philip Murray which appeared on 27 September:

Stalled progress on a vital new passing loop which would dramatically improve train reliability on the

Far North and Kyle lines has been criticised by rail campaigners.

Plans for a new passing loop at Delmore, west of Inverness, emerged last year, raising hopes that the long campaign for such an improvement might be nearing an end.

At present there is no way for trains to pass each other between Muir of Ord and Inverness, meaning that a single delayed train can lead to a domino effect that causes knock-on timetable disruption for it and other services.

Indeed, that very scenario played out on Thursday last week, when the late running 6:18 Wick to Inverness service - which was only 18 minutes behind schedule at Conon Bridge - was then forced to wait at Muir of Ord for a gap in traffic to proceed on to the Highland capital.

It did not leave the Muir of Ord platform until 11:21 - one hour and six minutes after it was scheduled to depart.

But despite these problems and long-running calls for a fix, almost two decades have now passed since the Friends of the Far North Line and business leaders first began calling for a passing loop between Beaully and Inverness to resolve this notorious bottleneck.

And with the project now seemingly stuck in limbo while it waits on budget approval, fed up campaigners have drawn attention to the stark contrast between the project's glacial progress and the swift creation of the line by the Victorians.

Mr Murray goes on to quote from the Convener's Report in the September 2024 edition of *Far North Express* which lamented the 19 years we've been waiting for a short length of double-track to allow trains to pass each other, and contrasted that with the mere three years it took the Sutherland & Caithness Railway to construct 67 route miles of railway and 14 new stations in the 1870s.

The article concluded with Rhoda Grant's parliamentary question about the loop and Fiona Hyslop's reply, which can be read on our Parliamentary Questions page.

This printout from the [On Time Trains website](#) shows in graphic detail what happened to the 06:18 mentioned in the article.

It ran well from Wick and arrived at Lairg 2 minutes early. It then had to wait for the 07:00 from Inverness to pass, which arrived at Lairg 9 mins late. The 06:18 left Lairg 10 mins late which extended to 16 mins late leaving Tain and 18 late leaving Invergordon (for unknown reasons). It arrived at Muir of Ord, the last crossing place, 17 mins late, so was held for 50 minutes to allow 10:41 Wick and 10:56 Kyle to pass. When it was eventually released the driver managed to cut 2 mins off the last section's timing and arrived 64 mins late at Inverness.

Location	Departure <input type="text" value="v"/>	
	Scheduled	Delay
Wick	06:18	0
Georgemas Junction	06:36	+3
Thurso	06:50	0
Georgemas Junction	07:03	+9
Forsinard	07:27	+3
Kildonan	07:45	+4
Helmsdale	08:00	+3
Brora	08:16	+1
Golspie	08:25	+1
Rogart	08:34	0
Lairg	08:52	+10
Ardgay	09:07	+11
Tain	09:23	+16
Fearn	09:29	+16
Invergordon	09:43	+18
Alness	09:49	+17
Dingwall	10:02	+18
Conon Bridge	10:07	+18
Muir of Ord	10:15	+66
Beaully	10:21	+65
Inverness	10:39 a	+64

Your convener was not alone in being disappointed by the *Press and Journal* article.

Richard Ardern, until recently a FoFNL committee member, is a frequent contributor to the various letter columns. The *P&J* published his letter too:

Rail delays due to track capacity

Sir, - Your correspondent, Alberto Lejarraga, has obtained some detailed statistics on train punctuality between Aberdeen and Inverness (*P&J*, November 2). It would be helpful to state what is the cause of these delays. One major factor is the lack of track capacity due to most of the line being single track in nature. Government promised major improvements in 2008 but only phase one was completed. This gave us the splendid dual track between Aberdeen and Inverurie and the greatly-improved Forres station and long loop. More recently, we now have a useful passing loop at Inverness Airport.

A line is only as good as its weakest link. Until the 1960s it was double track all the way from Aberdeen to Keith and there were many more passing loops between there and Inverness. The weakest link is now the 18 miles between Keith and Elgin which used to have three loops and takes 20 minutes to complete. If two trains arrive simultaneously at each end, one or both will go forward 20 minutes late depending on which is given priority.

One solution is to reinstate the former loop at Orton near the Spey Bridge.

It was part of the 2008 proposals, and users continue to campaign for this. When freight trains have to be diverted onto this line due to blockages south of Aberdeen, passenger trains have to be cancelled. There is not enough capacity.

The government knows this, but the 2008 money is still to be forthcoming.

ScotRail is doing its best, but urgently needs more track capacity which would also give the hourly service frequency that was spoken about in 2008.

RJ Ardern, Inverness.

*66506 on a driver training run
passes 158721 on the 13:30
Inverness – Elgin at Inverness
Airport Station on 4
August 2023.*

Photo: Sandy Colley

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A96 CORRIDOR REVIEW

And then the news broke that the Scottish Government's *A96 Corridor Review* had concluded that "Overall, the Refined Package performs better than Full Dualling in terms of the appraisal criteria, particularly with respect to the impact on the environment..."

The "Refined Package" is the recommendation resulting from the analysis of the effects of various options for improving transport links between Inverness and Aberdeen, covering all forms of transport. The Scottish Government's long-term wish is to fully dual the A96. However, the review concluded that at present it is more important to improve both road and rail links.

The Refined Package includes eight options:

- Active Communities
- Improved Public Transport Passenger Interchange Facilities
- Investment in Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and Mobility as a Service (MaaS)
- Linespeed, Passenger and Freight Capacity Improvements on the Aberdeen to Inverness Railway Line
- Elgin Bypass
- Keith Bypass
- Targeted Road Safety Improvements
- A96 Electric Corridor

The cost estimate for the projects included in the Refined Package are £500m-£1000m as opposed to a probable £5000m for full dualling.

The positive recommendations for the railway are:

Three distinct improvements to the railway between Aberdeen and Inverness - linespeed improvements to reduce end-to-end journey times to two hours (currently approximately two hours and 25 minutes), the provision of passing loops to enable a more frequent passenger service and the provision of freight facilities to enable intermodal freight growth. These rail



interventions would:

- Deliver faster and more frequent journeys
- Improve access to key settlements containing a rail station
- Enhance reliability and network resilience
- Improve connectivity between communities along the corridor
- Contribute towards Scotland's net zero emissions targets by encouraging the use of public transport
- Encourage modal shift away from car
- Enhance freight capacity by introducing intermodal facilities

It is informative to compare the 2024 *A96 Corridor Review* with the 2008 *Strategic Transport Projects Review* recommendations. These include:

19 – RAIL SERVICE ENHANCEMENTS BETWEEN ABERDEEN AND INVERNESS

Intervention description:

A.187 *This intervention supports the objectives to reduce journey time and increase opportunities*

to travel, particularly by public transport, between Aberdeen and Inverness. The improvements to the railway between Aberdeen and Inverness would allow:

- *An increase in service frequency (minimum*

of hourly service over the full route)

- *A reduction in journey time by about 20 minutes between Aberdeen and Inverness*
- *Extra rail services between Nairn and Inverness to provide an overall two trains per hour over this section*
- *A new station at Dalcross with Park-&-Ride facilities and interchange facilities with Inverness Airport*

A.188 *Phase 1 would involve the introduction of new loops in the area and line speed improvements. Phase 2 would involve more comprehensive improvements to line speed, journey times and the provision of some dual tracking on approaches to Inverness and Aberdeen. Development of this intervention will also give consideration to the option of a station at Kintore.*

We hope that the *A96 Corridor Review* will result in the Scottish Government completing its 2008 plans by building on what was achieved in 2019-20 with the 16 miles of double-tracking and the new station at Kintore, along with the opening of Inverness Airport station in 2023.

However, in some of the press this good news for rail was completely sidelined and, in the case of the *Press and Journal* on 29 November, turned into a negative by the avalanche of hyperbole quoted from politicians and the headline "A96 review opposes full dualling of deadly road", with a subheading "Anger over more delays as report recommends bypasses at Elgin and Keith and rail upgrades".

To describe the A96 as a "deadly road" is to completely ignore the actual statistics. When considering the danger a road - or rather its drivers - represents, the only meaningful statistic is deaths and serious injuries per vehicle mile driven. Simply giving a total number of deaths for a complete road, regardless of its length or traffic density, distorts the reality. I live in a road which is only a couple of hundred yards long. Using the statistics newspapers and

road campaigners use, if an average of three people were killed in crashes every year on my road it would still be regarded as less dangerous than a 200 mile long A-road with four deaths per year. I think I might feel differently!

The A96 does not feature anywhere near the top of the list of roads in Scotland with the greatest number of deaths and serious injuries per vehicle mile driven.

The only collection of data using this criterion which I could find online is from the surprising source of the Regtransfers website (<https://www.regtransfers.co.uk/content/most-dangerous-roads>) which published a list of the 50 most dangerous roads in the UK in 2018. Top of the list, the A1010, has a figure of 12.70 per 1 million vehicle-miles driven. The only Scottish roads in this list were the A68 (partly in England), A7, A82, A71 with figures ranging from 1.82 for the A71 to 3.1 for the A7. The A9 and A96 do not appear in the list.

No-one considers any road deaths to be acceptable, but there simply isn't enough money to make it impossible for accidents to happen.

The anger shown by the reactions of various politicians to the review's publication illustrates the problem we have as rail campaigners - few politicians seem to share our belief that transferring as much traffic as possible to rail, by making it as fast, reliable and comfortable as possible for passengers, and convenient, affordable and reliable for freight, is the way forward. It's hard to imagine reactions such as "disgraceful", "sham and a disgrace", "been met with white fury", "ultimate betrayal of my constituents" ever being used about the postponing of a rail project.

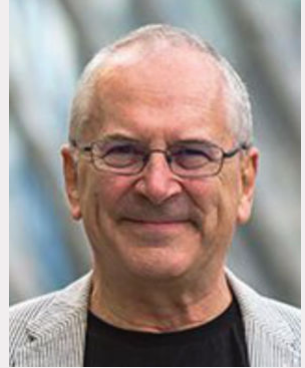
We can only hope that eventually a more responsible attitude takes hold and money is found to bring the Highland railways up to the required standard. The A96 Corridor Review may mark the beginning of such a change.

Ian Budd

Photo: Sandy Colley



LORD HENDY ON GBR



Those who attended our AGM & Conference in Brora in 2019 will remember Sir Peter Hendy's enthusiastic talk he gave as chairman of Network Rail. Now elevated to the House of Lords, Lord Hendy was appointed in July as Minister of State for Rail in an enlightened move by the new Labour Government. It's interesting to speculate how the comparative transport amateurs of the DFT will cope with a railway expert being given this job.

On 6 November the Railway Gazette published this report of Lord Hendy's keynote speech at the RIA conference.

UK Rail Minister Lord Peter Hendy struck an upbeat tone in his keynote address at the Railway Industry Association's annual conference on November 6, promising 'a new start for rail' and confirming that High Speed 2 'will go to [London] Euston'.

Hendy said it was a 'privilege' to play a role in what he felt would be a 'new start' for the industry as the structural reform to create Great British Railways gathers pace.

He promised that consultation would begin shortly on the planned Railways Bill that would provide the legislative basis for the creation of GBR, but he repeated recent comments from Transport Secretary Louise Haigh that GBR would not see the de facto recreation of British Rail 'with a headquarters on Marylebone Road'.

Instead, Hendy painted a picture of regionally-oriented management with integrated route structures that would oversee infrastructure, operations and staffing. 'On the South Western network for example, you'd have one organisation where decisions are taken through a management structure covering track, trains and people — not through a myriad of contracts as we have had until now.'

He hoped that the audience in the supply chain had welcomed the Labour government's inaugural Budget on October 30. 'I hope you're all encouraged by the start we have made', he said, reiterating the government's commitment to rail and to major investments including the Transpennine Route Upgrade and East-West Rail.

HS2 TO EUSTON

On HS2, he said the high speed railway 'will run to Euston', although the government has so far only confirmed that tunnelling will proceed using boring machines already in place for the drive from the construction site at Old Oak Common.

'There will be fresh oversight on the project', Hendy promised, reporting that a new ministerial supervisory group had already had its first meeting.

Rail Business UK can report 'cautious optimism' from sources in government about the prospects of future extensions to HS2, despite what are termed 'failures on all sides in the past that we cannot change' on the project.

Hendy said he was confident about the wider funding outlook for rail, reiterating Haigh's comments that 'rail runs right through all this government's missions'. However, he acknowledged that a Treasury-led Capital Projects Review would be undertaken between now and spring 2025, which would ensure rail investment 'aligns with financial reality'. This would be augmented by a 10-year national infrastructure strategy.

'I am not daft about the funding position for rail nor about the competition from other parts of government'. Hendy said. 'But we need certainty about what we want to do when we have funding.' Restoring certainty on the back of the previous government's decision to axe Phase 2a of HS2 last year would be a priority, he added. 'Not many people realise how few people were involved in that decision', Hendy suggested.

UK TRANSPORT SECRETARY ON GBR

On 29 October 2024 the Railway Gazette published a report of then Transport Secretary, Louise Haigh's comments about the Labour Government's plans for Great British Railways.

Speaking to the press following the launch of Rail Campus Derby on October 17, Haigh confirmed that had the previous government not already announced GBR a similar process would have been followed by Labour.

'There's been widespread consensus for many years about the problems in the railways and that's what our reforms are set up to address', she said. 'We would always have created a single directing mind and that is where our reforms go a little bit further than the previous government's, in bringing private operations into public ownership, bringing track and train together.'

The Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill 'calls time on a broken model, one that repeatedly failed passengers and one that cost tens of millions of pounds in fees each year'.

She confirmed that the government would 'bring passenger services into public hands as contracts expire over the next three years', and said 'in the meantime, I won't hesitate to take decisive action if operators don't meet their obligations. It's a message I've already delivered loud and clear to the managing directors of Avanti West Coast and CrossCountry.'

Haigh said there has been a lack of political leadership on rail, which she described as 'an industry more comfortable looking inwards, that fails to pull together when things go wrong, that has lost focus on improving each part of people's experience with the railways — so passengers don't get the journeys they deserve'.

Great British Railways would be a 'directing mind running the railways as one system, with a relentless focus on passengers' and would 'stop the blame game, by unifying track and train'.

She said 'it is really important to me that we have a new culture behind GBR', but noted that this will 'be the work of years, not months'. Rail Business UK understands that a cross-sectoral 'culture action group' has already been

established to try to break down barriers between parts of the industry.

Haigh said the creation of the Shadow Great British Railways under Chair Laura Shoaf is a recognition that change must begin immediately, adding 'I've asked her specifically to lay the foundations of culture change the industry needs'.

Haigh said 'under her leadership, the heads of Network Rail, DOHL (DfT OLR Holdings Ltd) and DfT's rail services group — the people in charge of track and train — will work closer than ever before to set the tone of reform and deliver immediate improvements.'

This will include bringing forward some integration ahead of legislation being passed 'because we knew we couldn't wait for legislation to start delivering improvements now'.

New performance measures will follow to ensure a more consistent and transparent approach.

Haigh said 'Network Rail will be abolished, and Great British Railways will become both the infrastructure provider and deliver the operations. They will deliver track and train together and that's what's really important to create the new culture that Laura Shoaf is leading through Shadow GBR at the moment and will establish as we legislate and set up GBR.

'It's really important that it isn't Network Rail 2.0, that it is bottom-up, delivering for the passenger and that we encourage that innovation from the workforce as well as the wider supply chain.'

Asked whether there is financial support to make this happen, Haigh said 'the money is absolutely there to deliver the railways, not least because the privatised, fragmented system that we've got has been wasting so much money for so many years. So we want to make sure that the savings that we can deliver are reinvested in railway services and in the operation.'

STATION USAGE FIGURES

Every year the Office for Rail and Road (ORR) produces statistics for station usage based on ticket sales. They cover 1 April to 31 March each year. The 2023-24 figures were published on 21 November 2024.

We've retained last year's format showing the comparison with pre-Covid numbers as a reference, giving a useful indication of post-Covid recovery. Although in general the FNL is still recovering well, some stations are far behind, while some of the quietest stations have shown the largest increase in footfall. Perhaps this gives ScotRail some more insight into how travel has changed since Covid.

A prolonged period without industrial disputes hanging over travellers would help bring the numbers back to their pre-Covid path of growing year-on-year.

Interestingly, although Altnabreac Station was closed for a third of 2023-24, its numbers were only slightly down. This perhaps has a lot to do with the fact that the station was closed during the coldest months of the period.

	2019-20	2022-23	2023-24	One Year Change	Change Since 2019
Wick	16,664	14,924	16,726	12.07%	0.37%
Thurso	39,702	31,446	37,626	19.65%	-5.23%
Georgemas Junction	1,570	1,318	1,588	20.49%	1.15%
Scotscaid	232	124	242	95.16%	4.31%
Altnabreac	232	280	250	-10.71%	7.76%
Forsinard	2,866	936	1,376	47.01%	-51.99%
Kinbrace	456	436	606	38.99%	32.89%
Kildonan	214	148	240	62.16%	12.15%
Helmsdale	5,086	3,484	4,038	15.90%	-20.61%
Brora	6,354	4,594	5,990	30.39%	-5.73%
Dunrobin Castle	1,240	1,428	1,940	35.85%	56.45%
Golspie	5,586	4,056	5,320	31.16%	-4.76%
Rogart	1,656	884	1,226	38.69%	-25.97%
Lairg	6,264	3,348	4,180	24.85%	-33.27%
Invershin	216	232	440	89.66%	103.70%
Culrain	312	304	300	-1.32%	-3.85%
Ardgay	6,408	4,412	5,674	28.60%	-11.45%
Tain	28,036	19,606	23,672	20.74%	-15.57%
Fearn	4,182	3,754	4,062	8.20%	-2.87%
Invergordon	27,826	18,758	28,580	52.36%	2.71%
Alness	27,050	16,804	20,928	24.54%	-22.63%
Dingwall	80,154	55,536	63,976	15.20%	-20.18%
Conon Bridge	18,022	10,898	13,104	20.24%	-27.29%
Muir Of Ord	70,850	47,688	52,306	9.68%	-26.17%
Beauly	46,510	36,588	38,376	4.89%	-17.49%
Inverness	1,214,648	974,808	1,169,550	19.98%	-3.71%
Total (excluding Inverness)	397,688	281,986	332,766	18.01%	-16.32%

PARK AND RIDE DIFFICULTIES AT INVERNESS

The main car park at Inverness station has been closed to the public for several months for 'renovation work'. Pedestrians have been allowed to continue to pass through this area, whilst the 'closed' car park has remained in use for ScotRail staff, BTP and other authorised users.



The alternative public car parks have been extremely busy in the run up to the Christmas period, and the large multi-storey car park has around 200 spaces closed off awaiting structural repairs. So the short stay area on the opposite side of the station has been

overflowing with parked cars on the access road used by delivery lorries etc.

I wonder how many trains have been missed by those unable to find a space to park and ride?

Neil Wallace



The exhibition in Inverness Library,
December 2024

Photo: Neil Wallace



MARKING THE 150TH

As all our readers know, 2024 was the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Far North Line to Thurso and Wick on 28 July 1874.

Following on from the 21 June event in Forsinard, the anniversary was to have been marked by a plaque unveiling and pop-up exhibition in Wick Station on 27th July, the day before the actual anniversary. Unfortunately a pay dispute between ScotRail and some of its staff caused this to be postponed indefinitely since services were likely to be too unreliable.

A decision was quickly made and the event was split into two. With hindsight this produced a much more satisfactory result. The photographic exhibition was held for four days in the North Coast Visitor Centre in Thurso in October and proved most successful, with the venue reporting much increased footfall during its duration.

The plaque unveiling took place in Wick Station on 2 November, with our President, Jamie Stone MP, doing the honours. This was an excellent occasion and we're most grateful to Network Rail for supplying the plaque and covering the cost of the delicious buffet lunch provided by The Home Bakery, Wick.

We put the exhibition in place for the day as well, which generated plenty of interest. To round off the year, our exhibition was hosted from 2nd to 7th December by



The plaque unveiled by Jamie Stone MP



Inverness Library, and the following week by Dingwall Community Library. We're delighted to have managed a presence at all three extremities of the line..

The exhibition was a joint venture and included panels from the Highland Railway Society, the SAPT and the Far North Line Community Rail Partnership. The history of the line and the importance of HITRANS and FoFNL was illustrated in the other panels. The exhibition was rounded off by two panels, each dedicated to one of the two photographers who supply so many of our cover photos - Niall Laybourne from Scotscladder and Peter Moore from Golspie.

In a sign of the times, the 150th celebrations were low-key compared with those for the Centenary and the 125th Anniversary. The Scottish Association for Public Transport (SAPT) had orchestrated a full day of events in 1974, photos of which featured in the exhibition - including a special train and a very large cake! In 1999 ScotRail took the lead when its Managing Director, the late Alastair McPherson, organised a plaque unveiling, the naming of a train and the theatre of telephone calls between the stations of Thurso and Penzance. We were delighted to welcome his widow Sara and her children to our plaque unveiling.

For this anniversary ScotRail was unable to take up our suggestion of naming a Class 158, citing an avalanche of naming requests following the railway being taken into public ownership in 2022 and no special train could be run, presumably due to the current financial constraints.

Ian Budd



Reaching the ends of the line:

[*Top*] The exhibition in Wick Station on 2 November.

[*Centre left*] The North Coast Visitor Centre, Thurso, 16-19 October.

[*Centre right*] Wick Station.

[*Bottom*] Inverness Library, 2-7 December.

HAPPY 150TH WICK STATION!

WWW

In addition to the events described in this issue of Far North Express, the 150th anniversary of the opening of the railway to Thurso and Wick inspired a most unusual gift to Wick Station, which is described in this article by David Scott from the John O'Groat Journal and Caithness Courier.

Caithness artist Ian Charles Scott has donated one of his works to Wick Railway Station to celebrate its 150th birthday.

The station, and northernmost leg of the Far North Line, was completed in 1874 and today (August 9) Ian donated a print called *Wick Railway Station 70s* as a special birthday present to the station.

Stationmaster Angie Murray accepted the framed work from the artist. "The painting features the Claymore Creamery and other memories now long gone and will be hung in the station to celebrate the anniversary," said Ian.



The artist who grew up in Wick and now resides in New York City recently had a watercolour shortlisted for a prestigious watercolour competition. Ian was one of 56 artists included in the global competition which forms an exhibition currently on display at the Fabriano Paper and Watermark Museum in Italy.

The painting shows a view from the railway station in the 1970s and the now demolished Claymore Creamery building.



The artist delivers the print.

What began as a chance to record something special to the Far North Line on its 150th anniversary turned into a bit of an adventure for your editor.

Intrigued by the handful of arms in the foreground of Ian Charles Scott's picture I wanted to know more, and to understand what I was seeing. I emailed Mr Scott in New York and got a wonderfully detailed reply the same day:

The painting is set during the 1970s which I largely re-created from photographs and imagination. Luckily, I also had a few sketches that I did.

In the print to depict the anniversary of the railway station for its 150th year, I created a painting that was illustrating how the station looked in its 100th year.

The car in the background is my father's old car in which he would drive me to the station when I was heading down to London to attend film college.

The station has always evoked a strong sense of escape and adventure. Quite often I would think back to old photographs, showing young soldiers heading out from Wick Station by the hundreds to fight in the First World War. What a sense of adventure and excitement there must've been for these guys who had never travelled any great distance in their lives, suddenly heading into a foreign country to experience God knows what.

The number of times I left from that railway station in the 70s and 80s on the old diesel-hauled train, and the number of hands waving goodbye as you sailed along the platform, I tried to evoke with the strange glove made up with small hands.

There's always a slight melancholy at the departure. Melancholy and excitement, leaving the familiar and heading to explore the new.

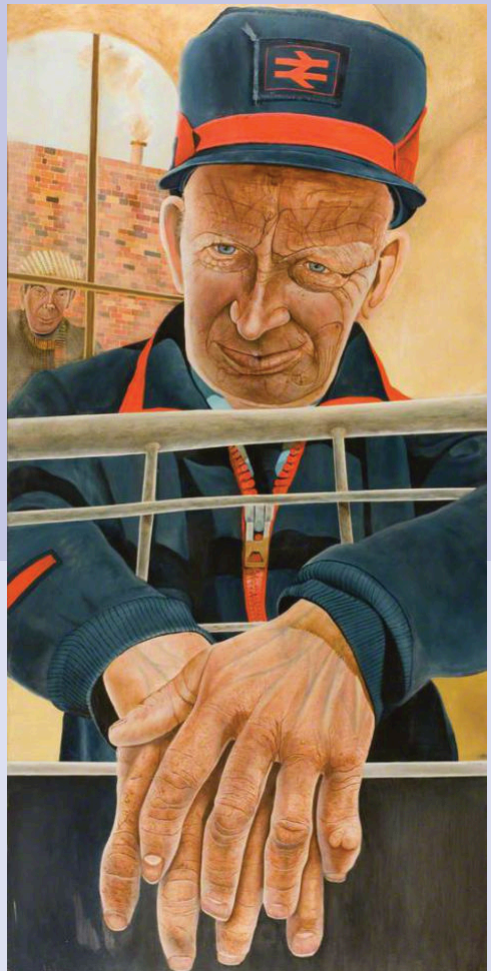
I've painted the Wick railway station several times over the decades - one of the largest of those paintings, which is about 8' high and 4' wide, was to depict a Mr McLeod who worked there during the 1980s.

Wanting to see more of Mr Scott's paintings I searched online and found many references to his work. I also found his [Facebook page](#), and on it this comment about the Wick Station painting:

"One of my favourite, most exotic locations to watch travellers and collect cream as a boy! I can still smell the milky steam and diesel that permeated that space, there is something ethereal about the end of the line?"

In researching this piece I've loved looking at lots of Mr Scott's work online - definitely worth a look if you haven't seen his paintings already.

Ian Budd



THE KING VISITS HELMSDALE

On 7 August King Charles III visited the Far North Line for the second time in recent years to unveil a plaque at Helmsdale Station to mark the 150th anniversary of the final extension of the line.

This visit was organised by the Lord Lieutenant of Sutherland, Major General Patrick Marriott CB, CBE and was combined with a walk to the Kildonan Parish War Memorial nearby, for a ceremony to celebrate its centenary three weeks later. The King's visit there was marked by the flypast of an RAF Typhoon.



King Charles reading the plaque as Allison Cowie, Chair of the Helmsdale & District Community Council looks on.



The King chats to Mike Willmot with Frank Roach and Daniel Brittain-Catlin.



The King showed a keen interest in the restoration project which transformed Helmsdale Station a few years ago. He seems to have a soft spot for railways, having mentioned the highlight of his childhood visits to Balmoral being breakfast on the train on the Deeside line, when he unveiled the Red Wheel at Dunrobin Castle Station in 2021.

The Helmsdale plaque, a slab of Caithness slate, has since been erected on the station alongside the "Jellicoe Express" plaque.

This was the King's second visit to a station on the Far North Line this year, having visited the RSPB Flow Country base at Forsinard on 31 July [left] to mark the inscription of the area as a UNESCO World Heritage Site that month.

Three royal visits to the FNL in three years is pretty good going!



REPURPOSING COAL WAGONS

This news item from the Porterbrook website prompted an obvious question: **How much effort is going into procuring timber wagons?**

West Fraser is going ahead with building its rail facility at Dalcross; The Highland Council has given planning consent to the lineside timber loading facility at Altnabreac; Scottish Government policy is to have as much freight carried by rail as possible - but, no wagons...

A partnership between Freightliner, WH Davis and Porterbrook will see a residual coal fleet repurposed into aggregate box wagons, supporting the UK supply chain and driving sustainable innovation in the rail industry.

The repurposed wagons will be funded by Porterbrook, with the conversions being carried out at the WH Davis factory in Mansfield, bringing new life and service to an otherwise redundant fleet.

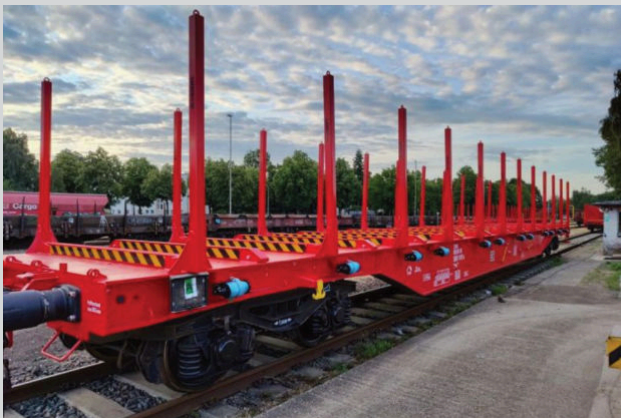
Dave Penney, Managing Director – Rail Services & Heavy Haul at Freightliner, commented, “We are delighted to be giving an otherwise redundant coal wagon fleet a new lease of life. Not only is this the more sustainable option, but it also allows us to support the local economy as these wagons will be reconditioned in the UK. We look forward to seeing the wagons in action next year delivering for our customers across the UK.”



Freightliner Heavy Haul HXA coal hopper

Mark Wyborn, Head of Freight at Porterbrook, said, “With freight volumes in the construction sector on the rise and expected to continue growing, we are proud to support the industry through our partnership with Freightliner and WH Davis. This agreement highlights our commitment to investing in the long-term growth of rail freight while providing affordable, innovative, and sustainable rolling stock for the UK railway.”

Andy Houghton, Managing Director – WH Davis Ltd, added, “This is a fantastic opportunity to demonstrate what can be achieved by giving redundant fleets a purpose for the next 30 plus years. It’s a truly sustainable option that also gives UK manufacturing a boost to enable the creation of UK jobs in the industry. I really can’t wait to see our latest box wagon design in traffic for Freightliner in 2025”



It was also announced back in May 2024 that in Germany DB Cargo has implemented a cost-effective strategy to modernise its timber transport fleet by repurposing wagons from its steel division.

Photo: DB Cargo

A WINTER'S TALE...

I was going through Dad's papers, tidying up after a long life. He had not left too much admin, just two boxes of papers to empty, but one stopped me in my tracks. It was a wooden job, full of old documents, and underneath were three medals. He had never talked about the war. Just wanted to forget.

There was the 1939-45 Star, which everyone got, and the Defence Medal for non-combatants. Dad told us he was a Naval officer with a 'cushy number' ashore, so the Atlantic Star surprised me, as it was awarded for the Battle of the Atlantic. Dad saw action after all.

Putting everything back, a notebook fell out, opening at the heading 'The Misery Train'. The first line read: "I can't tell anyone, so I'm writing this to get it out of my head". Below are his words.

SNOWED IN

Our destroyer put into Scapa after a rough Atlantic convoy, weather freezing, seas violent. It was hell, but kept losses down. We were bunkering when the Captain called me over.

"I've had two Admiralty signals", he said. "One sending us out again. The other sending you to London. You're being posted, doesn't say where. Report to a Captain Moran on arrival. Sorry to lose you, you're a damn fine signals officer."

The ship sailed that night and I crossed to Thurso in a blizzard. I couldn't head south immediately, it was snowing hard and no trains were running. No beds were available so I holed up in the Station Hotel bar, getting little sleep.

It was a week before I could get on the Admiralty 'express', or 'The Misery' as we called it. Standing room only for 22 hours to Euston and no heating. Men were crammed into luggage racks and even officers struggled for a seat.

It was nearly Christmas so anyone who'd wangled leave wanted to get away as soon as the line reopened. Six days' worth of matelots trying to squeeze into one night's-worth of train.

The platform was a scrum, officers shoved ratings, ratings pushed back. My rigger skills took me through and I found myself in the corridor outside a compartment with only one occupant. I dived in, slammed the door, then caught my breath. "God!" I exclaimed. "It's cold as death in here!"

'It is, right enough,' my companion replied, through a thick Glasgow accent.

His voice was familiar, but not his face, or at least not at first. When he turned towards me, it was paler than candle wax, his beard matted like seaweed.

"It's... it's... Petty Officer Jenkins isn't it?" I asked uncertainly. He looked puzzled, as though trying to remember.

"Aye," he hesitated. "Aye, sir, Jenkins. That's it."

"I thought you were with the ship?"

"I was, sir. But I've been sent down."

With that cryptic reply, he turned his gaze to the window. It was covered with a thick sheet of ice. I don't know what he hoped to see, but I understood his reticence. Most sailors don't like chatting with officers. We try not to get too familiar either, might have to send them to die.

DRIFTING OFF

As a railway buff, I'd noted our locomotives. You often get unusual Scottish antiques up there, and 'foreign' locos far from home. We had an LNER K4, a stranger to this LMS outpost. The driver told me it was borrowed from somewhere in Scotland and not yet returned. A 'Black Five' was pilot, and with 14 coaches on they'd have their work cut out on the twisting Highland lines.

With a hiss, cylinder drain cocks cleared, both engines whistled, and a fierce barking followed as they struggled for traction on snowy rails. Gradually, the drivers controlled the wheel-slip and the train edged out.

Nobody on the overcrowded train entered our compartment, but I was dog tired and didn't register how strange that was. As we negotiated

the sinuous Far North Line's curves, my eyelids drooped. I started to sway to the motion, like I did on a swell at sea, and soon, I was nodding off. Suddenly, there was an almighty lurch. I felt a chill hand on my arm. "Steady, sir, don't fall asleep." It was Jenkins, urgent and desperate.

I awoke, cold beyond comprehension. For a moment I had no idea where I was or what was happening. Then I remembered: we'd been torpedoed, the ship had gone down in minutes in an icy sea. Only five of us made it onto a Carley float. Soaked through, the cold took us one by one. Huge waves crashed into the float. My frozen comrades, perched on the edge, fingers too numb to grip the ropes, fell off and disappeared.

Only Jenkins and I were left. I was succumbing to exposure from the bitter wind on wet clothes. Jenkins was made of sterner stuff. He dragged me into the bottom of the raft, shaking me whenever he thought I'd drift off. It was so tempting to let sleep take me.

That's when the big wave flipped the float over like a coin tossed in the air. We were thrown apart into dark waters. I lost sight of Jenkins. The cold soon overwhelmed me and I slipped into unconsciousness.

FORTUNES OF WAR

"Hey, sir. Do you want Edinbra?" A rough hand was shaking my shoulder. I was on a train, not in the life-sapping ocean. We'd stopped at a shadowy, station. My compartment was full.

Jenkins had disappeared. Must have changed for Glasgow while I was dreaming.

We crawled south for hours to Preston, Crewe and, finally, Euston. London looked very different from when I left in 1939. Buildings shrouded in sandbags. Bomb sites everywhere. Blackout making the streets dangerous. Dowdy decorations. No Christmas lights.

At the Admiralty, Captain Moran asked about my journey. Without waiting for an answer he said 'the Misery' gave him the creeps. "All those chaps who travel to Scapa and never come back. The train south must be full of ghosts searching for home."

"Don't know why they want you," he added. "Some professor asked for you. Taught you at Oxford. Says you know about something vital to the war effort.

Take this chit and get a ticket to Bletchley. Ring this number and tell them what train you're on. They'll send a car."

"By the way, sorry too about your ship."

"What about my ship?"

"Didn't you hear? Torpedoed, lost with all hands. They found one empty Carley float and the body of a Petty Officer Jenkins. Must have happened around the time you left Thurso.

"I say, old chap. Hold steady. Bad news, I know, but fortunes of war. Don't faint on me. Oh damn!"

ATMOSPHERIC FNL

[www](http://www.fnl.ie)



Photos by Niall Laybourne