

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



Issue 92
May 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	Moving On	15
Pandora - - - - -	4	From Your Overseas Correspondent - -	16
FNL 150	4	Trainline Travesty	17
FoFNL AGM & Conference - - -	5	Altnabreac - - - - -	20
FoFNL Committee Meetings Reports	6	Parliamentary Questions	21
Cancellations - - - - -	7	Class 197 - - - - -	22
Inverness Info	8	Fair Fares Eventually?	23
Cycle Storage Upgrades	9	A9 vs HML - - - - -	28
Why Are We Members of FoFNL? - -	10	Highland Autobahn	30
Newspaper Exchange	11	Wick in Wartime - - - - -	33
John Macnab - - - - -	12	An Early Royal Visit to Thurso	34
Scotland's Railway Delivery Plan	14	Letter to the Editor - - - - -	35
Stop Press - - - - -	15		

www.fofnl.org.uk/fne92.php is a companion page with some web links and larger versions of pictures found in this issue. This sign on a page denotes available material: [WWW](#)

FOFNL OFFICE BEARERS

President:

Jamie Stone MP

Vice-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:

Richard Ardern, *Inverness*

Iain MacDonald, *Alness*

Richard Mansfield, *Inverness*

Malcolm Wood, *Ardgay*

Chris Lewcock, (Co-opted)

Les Turner, (Co-opted)

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

Website:

www.fofnl.org.uk

Facebook:

www.facebook.com/fofnl

E-mail:

editor@fofnl.org.uk

Editorial Address:

3 Villafield Loan,

Bishopbriggs,

Glasgow , G64 3NZ

FAR NORTH EXPRESS IS PUBLISHED IN JANUARY, MAY AND SEPTEMBER

Cover Photo: Evening service for Inverness nearing Rogart on 30 June 2023.

Photo: **Peter Moore**

IMPORTANT NOTE TO OUR MEMBERS

Our Treasurer, David Start, has requested that we make sure to fill in the 'reference' box on **all** bank transactions. The ideal format would be **full name + membership number**.

If we don't do it ourselves the bank generates a reference, and data protection legislation prevents the bank from being allowed to inform David to which name the reference is attached. This can cause confusion when two or more members share a surname.

HEADCODE

After our AGM & Conference in Dingwall in 2022 I reported in Far North Express: "Matt Powell, Head of Sponsorship at Network Rail [was] the bringer of good news as he was able to announce confirmation that detailed planning work for the new passing loop near Inverness has begun, with it being brought into use in 2024."

Since then of course a mixture of Covid aftershock, the war in Ukraine and the after-effects of the catastrophic Westminster mini-budget of September 2022 have put a large dent in Scotland's budget and ability to fund new projects. Except that the Delmore Loop is hardly new. We've been campaigning for this for an astonishing nearly 20 years - that's how long it's been obvious that it's desperately needed. We still do not know whether it will be built, because it has to pass the dreaded 'business case', where things which are clearly essential can fail to find sufficient 'monetary value' to proceed. For the A9 dualling to pass this test, a huge £420m 'driver frustration' value had to be included. We hope that a similar 'railway reputation' value can find its way into the Delmore Loop's business case.

Not that there's any disagreement about the need for the loop: Transport Scotland, ScotRail, Network Rail and ourselves are in alignment here. The reputation of the Far North Line for reliability, particularly of the current 06:18 from Wick is, by all accounts, damaging the prospect of building greater passenger numbers. People can't risk using that service for anything that is time-critical and that kind of awareness amongst the travelling public is capable of doing great harm to the idea of using the train. If I lived on the line and had an appointment in Inverness at, say 11:15, I would certainly drive - quite an admission from a dedicated rail campaigner!

This needs to be fixed. In fact, while we're thinking about such things, the Delmore Loop isn't the only one we need. On one of my trips to the northern end of the line our train became about 15 mins late during the journey, some of which could possibly have been made up later. However, our lateness meant that a decision had

had to be taken to prioritise the passengers on the southbound service. This was scheduled to cross with us at Forsinard, the next passing loop, 24¼ miles away. As it would have taken us 34 minutes to get there it would have made the southbound service very late.

For people with an interest in railways and an understanding of the mechanics of trying to run services on single-track lines, this was just something to tolerate. It wasn't raining and I can think of far worse places to wander around than Helmsdale station! For people who were just using the train to get to a place at a time - which is arguably not an unreasonable plan - this will have been a major annoyance. At least one more loop is needed further north.

Two of us from FoFNL had a very friendly meeting with Fiona Hyslop MSP, just before she became Cabinet Secretary for Transport in February. She proved to be well aware of the various shortcomings of the Highland railways, the subject of our meeting. We didn't doubt that she understood exactly what we were describing, however, the best assurance which she was able to give was that plans weren't being scrapped, just delayed.

Embarrassment

Meanwhile, the Scottish Government has been embarrassed by the (sometimes disingenuous) campaign by members of the public, and some of its own MSPs, into promising to dual the remaining single carriageway sections of the A9 south of Inverness at vast expense, by the most expensive method possible. Unlike the parallel railway, the A9 has no capacity issues whatsoever. We are often told that the cost of this will not affect the money being spent on rail projects in Scotland. This seems to be stretching credibility to breaking point - how can it not?

We need our MSPs to get a grip on the need for investment in Highland railways, before they fall any further behind the rest of Scotland. They're already somewhat of an embarrassment, when it's quicker to get to *Paris* from Edinburgh by train, than to Wick.

PANDORA...

In January 1935 LNER Chief Mechanical Engineer Nigel Gresley obtained Board permission to design a new train - locomotive and carriages - to celebrate King George V's Silver Jubilee. The train would run at unprecedented speed from Kings Cross to Newcastle and back.

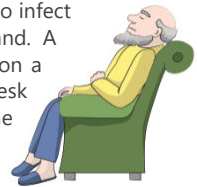
Gresley had been impressed by a visit to Hamburg two years earlier when he had seen the streamlined train on the Berlin run, and by the Bugatti-inspired locomotives in Italy. The rivalry between LNER and LMS led both companies to design locomotives capable of much higher speeds than were possible before then.

LNER's *Silver Jubilee* entered service in September 1935 - a mere eight months from pencil hitting drawing board to locomotive (*Silver Link*) hitting 100 mph for a sustained 43 miles on its first passenger-carrying run. *Silver Link* ran the return service every day for a fortnight until the second A4 (*Quicksilver*) left Doncaster. *Silver King* and *Silver Fox* completed the quartet. It's a great shame that *Silver Link* was not preserved, unlike six of her sisters including, of course, *Mallard*, the proud possessor of the steam speed record of 126 mph on 3 July 1938 - unbroken to this day.

Why all the nostalgia? Small boys well into their 80s are allowed a little excursion into the past, but there is a powerful lesson to be learnt. A revolutionary new design - streamlining - went from "Build it" to "Right away" in eight months. When did the Lentrans Loop first get this ex-small boy jumping up and down? When did Network Rail start to see merit in the idea? When did a pencil hit a drawing board? When will a shovel hit dirt? And all Pandora wants is several hundred metres of railway line. Nothing fancy, no ground-breaking (sorry) design. Just routine stuff.

And the cost? Ah, there's the rub. Pandora's uninformed guess is that it will be at least twice what it would have cost if someone had got round to building it all those years ago when the jumping up and down first started.

But it's not just a little loop at Lentrans: it's the thinking that has been allowed to infect all major infrastructure works, and not just on the railway, and not just in Scotland. A bright idea spends far too long before it becomes a proposal; far too long on a designer's desk before it becomes a detailed plan; far too long on a Minister's desk before it gets put to the Treasury (or equivalent): far too long before it gets the go-ahead. Once that happens it's pretty quick, especially if it's only a little bit of railway line. Eight months should be more than enough.



FNL 150

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

The opening of the final stretch of the Far North Line from Helmsdale to Thurso and Wick took place on 28 July 1874. FoFNL is co-ordinating with the Highland Railway Society and the Scottish Association for Public Transport to mount an exhibition in Wick Station to commemorate the event, and to have a session of talks, probably on the afternoon of Sunday 28th. Plans are not finalised yet so details will appear on our website in due course.

The Far North Line Community Rail Partnership, in collaboration with FoFNL is also holding an event to celebrate the opening, scheduled to fit with our AGM & Conference in June. The event will be held at RSPB Forsinard on Friday 21 June. Speakers will cover the history and the future prospects of both the line and the landscape. The Press Release about this, with full details, is available to view on this issue's companion web page www.fofnl.org.uk/fne92.php.

FoFNL AGM & CONFERENCE

Our 2024 AGM & Conference will be held on Saturday 22 June in the Crown Church, Inverness, starting at 11:00 with the AGM for members, followed by the Conference, which is open to the public, at 11:45.

We have three main speakers this year:

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

Robert Gardner, a Chartered Engineer in telecommunications, who will talk about high-speed broadband on trains using low orbit satellites; **Anthony Smith**, until recently the Chief Executive of Transport Focus and **Roger French OBE**, erstwhile Managing Director of Brighton & Hove Buses, but since retirement the writer of a very entertaining and informative blog about his travels all over the UK by public transport.

We will also hear from Mark Ilderton, ScotRail's interim Service Delivery Director, and Frank Roach of HITRANS, who needs no introduction!

Crown Church Inverness

Crown Church is named after the hill district south of the city centre and railway station.

Directions for walking from Inverness Station:

- Leave the railway station by the gate reached by turning left immediately after passing through the ticket barriers and keep straight ahead into Falcon Square keeping the Eastgate Retail Centre buildings on your left.
- Enter the complex from Falcon Square and take the escalator or stairs up to the first floor level.
- Continue past Waterstones and join the main mall opposite HMV.
- Cross the main mall diagonally to the stairs and lifts.
- Go up one floor to the top [Floors 4 to 5 if you use the lift]
- Turn left past the toilets and go out on to the pedestrian bridge
- Turn left onto Stephen's Brae [You are already more than half way up]
- Continue past Velocity bike shop and café and you will see the church ahead.
- Go up to the junction and go across the pedestrian crossing.
- You will see the Midmills Door to the Church slightly to the left ahead of you.
- Go in to the porch and take the door to the left which brings you to the stairs.
- The meeting is upstairs.
- If you wish to use the lift, take the door straight ahead out of the porch. The lift is on your left halfway along the corridor.



FOFNL COMMITTEE MEETINGS REPORTS

Inverness Station ScotRail Meeting Room, 5 October 2023

Present: Ian Budd (Chair), David Start (Treasurer) Richard Ardern, Angus Stewart (Membership Secretary), Iain MacDonald, Malcolm Wood, Richard Mansfield, and Neil Wallace (Secretary).

Also Frank Roach (HITRANS) for last item.

ScotRail Matters

IB reported on his July meeting with David Simpson on topics explained in FNE 90. Also on meeting with Anne Gray who stated there were no plans to produce pocket timetables or timetable posters at stations. FoFNL had offered to help redraft local information posters, thus helping to address anomalies raised in station surveys.

NW gave examples of a combination of concerns raised with ScotRail on behalf of a visually disabled passenger who had experienced disruption at Conon Bridge station. Lack of CCTV at this station made monitoring and investigation more difficult.

IB spoke about ScotRail's action to deal with an overcrowded train at Inverness caused by cruise passengers returning to Invergordon - no options currently available for increasing train capacity on this service to cope with all such additional loadings.

NW had witnessed passengers for Scrabster ferry being unable to find a taxi on arrival at Thurso station. IB would check the extent of ScotRail information provided on this.

IB noted that a Thurso-Wick shuttle service may not be a viable proposal, due to the number of bus or train options already available. There were no developments regarding possible trials of alternative fuels on this section of FNL.

New Train Specs

FoFNL continuing to liaise with SAPT/FoWHL for combined submission to TS.

NW mentioned KTR* v7 revision and suggested autonomous boarding be emphasised.

*Rail Delivery Group's "Key Train Requirements"

ARCH Heritage Events

FoFNL had prepared a pop-up display with free information as part of a Highland Heritage Event in Dingwall in March, and NW would use this again at their upcoming conference. ARCH (Archaeology for Communities in the Highlands) also runs a family event on an occasional basis- it was agreed that FoFNL would look into the assembly of a child-orientated display possibly including quiz-type challenges etc with small gifts from sponsors as an incentive for taking part.

FoFNL Finances

Treasurer agreed allocation of up to £2000 for research study amongst non-users of FNL, subject to appropriate levels of partnership funding.

Committee supported proposal to move £8000 to an account with better interest rates.

FoFNL Future Planning

Committee succession planning - 2 possible candidates were identified for follow-up.

Preferred date for next AGM to be June 2024, probable venue to be in Inverness.

FNL 150 anniversary in July 2024 - discussed possible special events.

RA suggested collaboration with Highland Railway Society, SAPT and FNL CRP.

HITRANS Report

FR gave a brief update which included the following:

- Delmore loop - no definite timescale has been announced.
- Evanton - consultant's report not yet at a stage for community consultation.
- FNL rerailing - large sums allocated in CP7.
- FNL 150 anniversary - FR able to assist with facilitating arrangements.

Neil Wallace, Secretary

Crown Church Meeting Room, Inverness, 29 January 2024

Present: Ian Budd (Convener), David Start (Treasurer) Angus Stewart (Membership Secretary), Richard Arden, Iain MacDonald, Richard Mansfield, and Neil Wallace (Secretary).

Guests: Chris Lewcock and Les Turner.

Apologies: Malcolm Wood

Finance Report

DS highlighted key points: £26,500 assets and an estimated £850 surplus for year.

Membership Report

Membership numbers remain at 247.

Meeting with Transport Minister

IB circulated a draft paper covering key points to be highlighted at Holyrood meeting.

Modal shift policy and Net Zero commitments require more investment on rail. All rail lines from Inverness consisted of single track, with insufficient passing loops for capacity improvements and service reliability - Delmore loop construction overdue.

Service Quality Inspection Regime

Transport Scotland monitors ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper's quality of service through the Service Quality Inspection Regime (SQUIRE), which is a customer-focused scheme that measures the qualities of facilities at stations and on trains.

NW had been allowed to accompany Transport

Scotland's routine inspections round most of the FNL stations and hoped to include Inverness station in the coming weeks. ScotRail has the opportunity to rectify any notice served by Transport Scotland to their satisfaction before a performance score is finally calculated for that period.

Some issues noted by FoFNL were not explicitly part of the audit but were referred to ScotRail for comment; eg access issues to cycle racks, incomplete tactile paving and anomalies with Customer Information Screens regarding Rail Replacement buses.

Input to Planning Decisions

CL outlined how FoFNL could interact more effectively with relevant planning issues in the context of local and national transport strategies.

Freight Possibilities

LT explained the need for funding incentives to encourage further investment in rail freight operations, to enable modal shift of freight traffic from road to rail.

FoFNL Future Planning

AGM and Conference to be on Saturday 22nd June at the Town House in Inverness.

FNL 150 anniversary in July 2024 - to be discussed in more detail.

Neil Wallace, Secretary

In a subsequent email Committee Meeting it was agreed that we wished to co-opt both Chris Lewcock and Les Turner onto the committee until the AGM, when they will be up for election. We're delighted to say that they both accepted!

CANCELLATIONS

The Far North Line saw a spate of cancellations from early February through to mid April. These were bad enough to inspire angry letters in the press and an article in the Inverness Courier.

At a meeting with ScotRail's interim Service Delivery Manager on 19 April the reasons for this, and the plan to avoid a repetition were explained.

The unfortunate conjunction of several unrelated events and their impact on train crew availability was felt during this period. Improved resilience to FNL services has been built in to ScotRail's summer timetable, which takes effect from 2 June, and should provide a good service during this busy time.

Neil Wallace, our Secretary, has been accompanying the SQUIRE inspectors on the Far North Line to get a closer view of how the system works, and what it covers compared to our own five-yearly audit. He found it a useful experience and had some observations of his own at Inverness Station.

At the busy Inverness Station, some of the information displayed is misleading to visitors:

The **taxi rank** is indeed outside the station, but the bus service information is quite confusing.

The nearby **bus stops** which could usefully be mentioned are:

- Falcon Square - 50 yards from exit near Platform 2 (approx 15 services stop here)
- Inverness Bus Station - follow direction signs from exit near Platform 7 (for out of town bus and coach services, including those to Ullapool for ferry to Stornoway)

The National Cycle Network is approx 200 yards from the Station, depending on chosen direction, and there is a decorative Millennium sign for NCN7 near Platform 7 exit.

Inverness Castle has been surrounded by site hoardings since 2020, during conversion from former usage as a Sheriff Court to a tourist experience, due to open in 2025. Currently, the building is best viewed from the opposite side of the river, heading for Inverness Cathedral, which is around a 10 minute walk from Inverness Station.

Inverness Museum and Art Gallery is in Castle Wynd, and is indeed open to visitors.

The Tourist Information Centre in Castle Wynd closed in 2017, moving to a small shop unit at 36 High Street. There are ongoing plans to close this facility also.

- and finally: **Inverness Airport** now has a station, which opened in February 2023.

Onward Travel Information



Useful Information

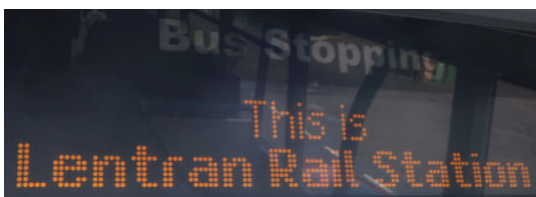
- The nearest taxi rank is located at the front of the station
- The nearest bus stop is situated on Union Street - 100m
- National Cycle Network - 500m southwest of the station
- Inverness Castle - 1.2km - 20 minute walk
- Inverness Museum and Art Gallery - 400m - 5 minute walk
- Tourist Information - Castle Wynd - 350m - 5 minute walk
- Caledonian Canal - 2km - 30 minute walk or 10 minutes by bus from Inverness bus station
- Raigmore Hospital - 7 minutes by bus from Inverness Queensgate or from Inverness bus station
- Inverness Airport - 20 minutes by bus from Queensgate



Our own station survey showed that most of the onward travel posters on the Far North Line contain incorrect information. It is quite a challenge for ScotRail to keep the posters up to date. They're very useful, but not so much if they have been overtaken by events. We arranged a meeting last year with the department which is responsible, and offered our help with checking new posters for all the stations on the FNL. We're optimistic that as the posters are routinely replaced they will now become more accurate.

Ian Budd

ScotRail is not alone in struggling to keep up with constant changes. Neil spotted this visual announcement on a Stagecoach bus - Lentrán Station closed in 1960!



CYCLE STORAGE UPGRADES

Some observations by Neil Wallace

At Muir of Ord and Conon Bridge stations, the traditional 'Sheffield' type of cycle racks and awkward-to-use cycle lockers have recently been replaced. The existing curved polycarbonate roofs were removed and deposited in a skip - might these have been offered to a local community organisation for further use?



The modern replacement two-tier aluminium cycle racks have upper level racks which pull out and swing down, and will require periodic maintenance to gas struts and rollers. No typical instruction pictograms are visible on how to load a bike onto one of the tilting upper racks, or to 'Mind Your Head' when using the lower level. Note that the new curved roof structure is much higher and offers minimal protection from the weather where the front is facing into the prevailing wind.

The compact nature of the new racks provides around a third more bike storage capacity at these stations, and also creates some free hardstanding space where the cycle lockers were. This space could be brought back into use by re-introduction of a few 'Sheffield' type of cycle stands suitable for use by non-standard bikes, including some provision for adapted bikes such as are used by disabled people.

Some cyclists are reluctant to leave their bikes in public places for the day because of the perceived risk of vandalism or theft, highlighted by broken locks being found beside some stands. At unstaffed stations on the Far North Line, CCTV is the optimum solution - however Conon Bridge station has no CCTV cameras, and this has also caused difficulties when the Help button has been pressed.



Finally, a photo of a similar replacement installation at Inverness, where the road markings demonstrate that motorcycles are being squeezed out in favour of cyclists!

WHY ARE WE MEMBERS OF FOFNL?

Frank Faulkner, FoFNL member for many years, poses an important question. Although living in the Far South, Frank is a regular attendee of FoFNL AGM & Conferences. He is also a writer of encouraging missives to your editor!

Me particularly - from the Deep South!

FNE drops through my letter box - I read with interest the regular broad selection of articles in an excellently-produced prize-winning Society magazine for what, after all, is a fairly esoteric subject.

Apart from a brief visit to my sister-in-law in Edinburgh I had never been North of the Border before retirement although I had been to Edinburgh, Perth and Stirling - in Australia. Retirement gave me the opportunity to do what I wished I had been doing for the previous 30 years - travel - and we have about a dozen trips to the other hemisphere under our belts.

For many years my passion had been North Wales, first viewed from the seat of a tandem which a pal and I had bought for £10 and then subsequent regular visits with the local mountaineering club. We never got as far as Scotland. North Wales was probably far enough in the back of a old short-wheelbase Land Rover and before motorways.

A partial retirement to Wales, commuting by the *Irish Mail* did not work out, a new home to our own design down South and a very large garden proving a bigger draw.

But then an opportunity as a Tour Manager for a niche travel company specialising in Tours to Scotland arose and so it was, that "Your Experienced Tour Manager" (who had never been further north than Edinburgh) found himself with 52 passengers bound for Aberdeen, Orkney and Shetland. It was the largest and most difficult party I encountered - but I survived - and completed the tour with as many people as I started. (Rule 1!)

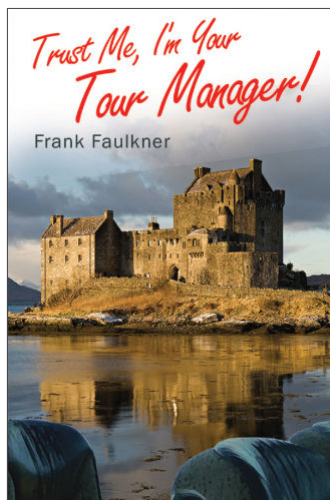
Over the next 20 years I thoroughly enjoyed escorting parties to the Highlands, Northern and Western Isles, tours often including the Far North Line. Most of my passengers were my age and had been all over the world - but few to a Scotland for which I hope I was able to enhance their experience.

On several of my trips on the FNL I met Frank and Kate, and their two small children on the train. They must have introduced me to the FoFNL. With an application form?

QED!

I assume that most members are locals who have more reasons for the health of the FNL than us "foreigners" but we all applaud and support the officers of the FoFNL in their efforts towards the line's survival and improvement and their credible contacts with the parties that matter.

This article gives us the opportunity to mention Frank's very readable 2014 book about his experiences. Although apparently out of print, it can easily be found online.



NEWSPAPER EXCHANGE

An important part of our work at FoFNL is to keep an eye on newspaper articles and correspondence and to take the opportunity to make our views known.

This exchange at the beginning of the year was the result of an opinion piece by Kate Forbes MSP talking about the Highlands being left behind. Although Kate didn't mention rail, we know that she does use the train as well as driving.

The Herald, 31 Jan 2024

Action needed on rail line

We at the Friends of the Far North Line heartily concur with Kate Forbes' analysis of the problems faced by the Highlands being left behind in terms of investment. Ms Forbes states that the region "desperately needs decent roads, good schools and reliable ferries in order to thrive"; to those we would add railways.

The Scottish Government has plans for very significant modal shift from road to rail as part of its commitment to Net Zero. In order to achieve this the region requires railways that are better than the slow, single-track lines which currently serve most of the region. To run a reliable and attractive service for passengers and freight, trains need to be able to pass each other at many places along the line. On the Far North Line the gaps between some of these "passing loops" are so great that if a train just misses the chance to pass one coming the other way, because it's running a little late, it may have to wait 40 minutes before proceeding. The "intercity" routes from Inverness to Aberdeen or the Central Belt are little better.

There is currently no sign of the Government addressing this. We hope this will change very soon.

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

The Herald, 1 Feb 2024

Trains could be so much better

I FULLY support Ian Budd (*Letters*, January 31) in his views on the Far North Railway Lines and his comments on the "Inter City" lines between Aberdeen, Inverness and Glasgow, Edinburgh and Stirling. I would add to that my great concern about the West Highland lines, to Oban, Fort William and Mallaig. All these railway lines are vastly underfunded and have been since I was working in the West Highlands for British Rail just before rail privatisation in 1994.

Just last year I had the experience of travelling, by rail, from Zurich in Switzerland to Tirano in Italy over the Bernina Pass. Superb scenery, comparable with Scotland but the train service is so much better, with modern, comfortable trains that have large observation windows. We really should be ashamed of ourselves here in Scotland; we could, and should, do so much better.

It would, of course, be easier to do better if prominent politicians, such as Kate Forbes, were to travel by train. She does excellent work in supporting the Highlands but if she were to use the train for that long journey from Dingwall, or at least Inverness, to Edinburgh, it would take away some of that stress of driving on the A9. The "HST" trains that run on that line are very comfy. We need to get more people travelling by train, rather than by road and we need our politicians to be in that modal shift too.

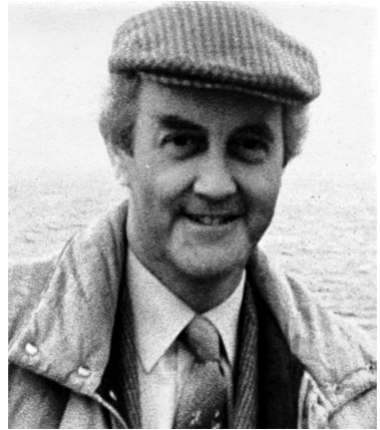
Patricia Fort, Glasgow.

JOHN MACNAB

We are sad to report that John Macnab, a long time FoFNL member, passed away in the first week of January aged 87. He was a retired railwayman and frequent contributor to the press, both railway and national.

He often wrote to me after the publication of an issue of Far North Express, and corresponded regularly on railway matters with my colleague, Richard Ardern.

Looking through my records I found many quotable comments from John - here is a selection:



Another excellent issue of the magazine and thanks to all concerned in putting it together.

In regard to that celebrated by "Pandora" regarding the electrification of Scotland's railways, with a year of 2035 given as completion of the main lines of route, it will coincide with my 99th year of existence. Whether this happy blending of events will take place is in the lap of the gods!

It is to be hoped these railway plans and intentions (and much else) come to pass, and noting that which befell the proposals of 2008 am reminded of a grandparent telling me that promises are like pie crusts, easily broken, Whatever comes to pass, pressure must be sustained to keep the aspirations for the future "alive and kicking"!

[In response to a planned article - "A Question of Capacity and Ambition" - FNE, January 2024] I fully endorse your comments and points made. It is hard hitting but totally necessary.

I would only add one thing: when is the finance to be made available for replacement of much of the rolling stock fleet? It only exists on a sheet of paper at the moment.

Bearing in mind, even if any orders placed tomorrow, five years would at least pass before anything enters service.

Whatever happens, may the fates preserve us from a CalMac scenario!

It may be ludicrous to even imagine, let alone consider such a possibility, that there still exists a deep seated "mindset" amongst those who govern us of anything furth of the Central Belt in the age-old perception of Lowland Scotland having little or no interest in Highland Scotland? One would have thought this was now of the past in all matters and concerns.

In finality, "Integrated Transport in The Netherlands", why, oh, why, can we not do the same - or at least try? Mayhap such endeavour is not in the genes of those who govern us.

In passing, you will doubtless have watched Michael Portillo bringing a splash of colour (sartorially speaking) on his journeying along the Far North Line in his current TV programme. I also had watched the "Scotland's Far North Line" on Channel 5 as mentioned in the Journal. Keeping the Far North theme going I co-authored an article on this line of route in the December 2021 issue of "Steam Days" magazine. I also note that "Today's Railways" magazine in their forthcoming March issue (on sale 14th of that month) will have a feature on the Far North Line.

At least it is keeping it in the "news!"

I noted while searching for something else the other day, the 1951 copy of "Trains Illustrated" magazine mentioned that in 1927 in a debate on future motive power it was stated "By 1940 electrification of rail routes would be completed".

A bit of a sweeping statement then and similarly if now made in regard to 2040!

I got FNE 84 [September 2021] on Saturday last which is an excellent read in every account. Well done to yourself and others.

We collectively hold our breath in what will come to pass as regards the railway business in Scotland next year. [ScotRail taken into public ownership] One hopes its governance will not be akin to that which "runs" CalMac.

This is possibly his last published letter: Railway Magazine, October 2023

Your article regarding the Selby diversion was fortuitously apposite coinciding with the debacle of HS2 concerning its further extension and the ensuing, and as yet undefined, completion and operation of the LondonBirmingham portion.

What is clear is that the aforementioned diversion was conceived, planned and brought about by all those concerned who knew exactly what was necessary simply getting on with the task in hand.

HS2 has failed miserably, and I fear it will become the ultimate line between somewhere in London and somewhere in Birmingham, with all parties involved – politicians, planners et al – equally guilty of total mismanagement. The rest of us bearing witness to all this hang our heads more in sorrow than shame.

John Macnab, Falkirk

Jim Summers, who was Regional Operations Manager, British Rail Scottish Region until his retirement, wrote these words about John:

Many members will be familiar with the name but unless they worked on the railway they are unlikely to have met John. His increasing deafness made meetings of organisations difficult for him. Nevertheless, in his retirement John wrote many valuable articles on railway life for a variety of publications, and was of inestimable assistance to those trying to trace the history of Scotland's carriage stock. During the transition from steam he was in the Coaching Stock Section of the Scottish Region and kept records which no one else cared to do - these were unique and have since been used by John to assist many researchers. His papers are now cared for in the archives of the Museum of Scottish Railways at Bo'ness. John lived through the withdrawal and reinstatement of the Blue Trains, when his carriages were key to the interim service. Latterly he was responsible for the production of the Scottish aspects of the Great Britain Passenger Timetable, and nursed the relationship with CalMac. Non-railway folk reading the letters columns of the Scottish Press will certainly know his name, for he loved to inject common sense into discussions in those papers about the railway.

Another good railwayman gone. May he rest in peace.

SCOTLAND'S RAILWAY DELIVERY PLAN

In March Scotland's Railway Delivery Plan 2024-2029 was published. This lays out what is intended for Control Period 7 (CP7).

Inevitably perhaps, from our perspective as rail campaigners, it is disappointing in terms of a complete absence of plans to provide additional infrastructure, such as passing loops, double-tracking and electrification.

Basically the tenor of the plan is working with what is already there more efficiently and more economically.

There are many references to the Office of Rail and Road's (ORR) Public Performance Measure (PPM) of 92.5%. This is not considered achievable until the end of the period, if then. The text on this is somewhat contradictory, stating at one point that the PPM doesn't apply if trains are "disrupted by speed restrictions due to severe weather or delayed connections", yet elsewhere mentioning that NR's forecast is "ambitious but achievable, given the increasingly challenging weather context in which it's being delivered."

'Annex A' of the plan is called "Our Plan to make Journey Times faster". NR's plan is to "build confidence and trust that we're working collaboratively with all our customers and demonstrate our focus on making journey times faster, we've developed metrics so that we can transparently measure our progress."

"For ScotRail's Inter7City services between the Central Belt and Aberdeen and the Central Belt and Inverness, we've developed a plan to deliver 'a mile a minute' journey times by 2030."

"The Inter7City metric has been forecast based on the delivery of our eight commitments in this plan. It will be re-forecast once final business cases have been agreed for investments such as the Aberdeen Route Upgrade and the Highland Main Line corridor enhancement. The delivery of both these investments and the delivery of the eight commitments in this plan will result in mile a minute journey times."

[The eight commitments referred to here are all about internal systems for reporting and assessing progress.]

The aspiration for "a mile a minute" journey times on the HML really puts into perspective the difference between the Highlands and the rest of the country - Glasgow to London at this speed would take the best part of seven hours.

Meanwhile, the Far North Line, whilst having had some much needed improvements is still plagued by insufficient passing loops and an increasing journey time on some trains. The HML has been seeing its journey times successively lengthened, with much longer dwell times at Perth to allow for late running. Bus companies are tempted by the easy competition they face on the A9, which will only diminish even more as the road is improved. On the freight front we can't even find timber wagons to provide the planned service from Altnabreac to the West Fraser factory at Dalcross.

The various reports and plans which the parts of the Scottish rail industry produces, including STPR2, are always a frustrating read for us since it seems that the Scottish Government is not really grasping the nettle of building infrastructure to achieve its aims. Railways are expensive, but essential to achieve the modal shift targets for passengers and for freight. The current economic climate makes *any* extra spending difficult, so hopes for even a small project such as the Delmore Loop in the immediate future, are fading.

The Highland 'railway deficit' is already very serious, in common with other areas of spending, such as health service provision. There are some services, including both of these, which cannot be calculated purely on a per population basis. The distribution of parliamentary seats for Holyrood mitigates against the Highlands' needs being fully taken into account. There are ten MSPs, of whom only three have constituencies, the other seven covering the whole region. This means that some

25-30% of the Scottish landmass is represented by fewer than 8% of the MSPs, while the Highland railways represent nearly 20% of the Scottish railway system.

We are told that the 'business case' method used to calculate the value of a proposed investment is not based purely on monetary benefit but includes potential economic development, social, and environmental factors. It would be most interesting to see real-life examples of how this works.

The railways in the Highlands are so far behind the rest of the country that a fresh look needs to be taken by the politicians, and a serious plan laid, to avoid Scotland becoming even more divided by its geography. The 2021 report, *Rail for All*, by David Spaven and David Prescott for the Scottish Green Party, would make an excellent template, but this requires MSPs to understand the need, and to prioritise accordingly.

Ian Budd

STOP PRESS

The shadow UK Labour Transport Secretary, Louise Haigh, announced on 25 April that if Labour wins the forthcoming election the remainder of British railway TOCs (train operating companies) will be taken into public ownership over the five year term. The system will be the same as in Scotland, with an arm's length company, using the existing name Great British Railways, overseeing operations. Freight operators will continue to be privately owned. Open access for private passenger operators, such as Grand Union Trains and Lumo, will continue, and the operating companies will still lease rolling stock from the ROSCOs (rolling stock companies). Four TOCs are already under direct control and the others' service contracts will be taken over as they expire.

From our perspective, the name Great British Railways is a strange choice, since GBR will not be responsible for Welsh, Scottish or Northern Irish rail operators.

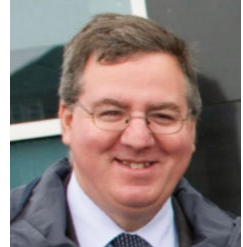
MOVING ON

2024 has seen the departure of two railway officials with whom FoFNL has maintained excellent relationships. In January David Simpson, ScotRail's Service Delivery Director announced his departure, and in March the Department for Transport announced that Alex Hynes, Managing Director of Scotland's Railway, will be seconded to the DfT for two years from April, as Director General, Rail Services.

David has been our go-to ScotRail officer when we wanted to understand about an issue or make suggestions. I, as convener, have had roughly six-monthly meetings with David since I took over the role in 2018. He has supplied a great deal of useful information to us in that time, which has helped us enormously. It's very important to be able to have open discussions with a friendly face.

It's been a pleasure working with Alex too. He would always make time for a conversation when we met at various railway events. I remember walking along the platform at Inverness some distance behind him on our way to the 2017 FoFNL AGM & Conference. Alex was new to the job, and we were yet to meet, but I noticed that when he was passing through the ticket barrier he stopped and introduced himself to some ScotRail staff who were manning the barrier. My first impression was therefore of someone who knows how important it is that everyone in a large organisation feels valued as part of the team.

Both men will be hard to replace, we wish them well and look forward to having such excellent relationships with their successors.



David Simpson



Alex Hynes

Ian Budd

FROM YOUR OVERSEAS CORRESPONDENT

FoFNL member, Paul Tiney - one of five of our members living in Orkney - ventures south to far away Oxfordshire.

How I chortled over *Jaimie's Journal* headed with "Linking up rail and sea", (see the last issue No.91). In the balmy month of August last I decided to attend a music festival in Banbury, Oxfordshire. My chosen mode of transport naturally would be train; well, after catching the ferry from Hoy obviously. Thurso to Inverness, Sleeper to Euston, Marylebone to Banbury, and so began the consultation of timetables. Ah, timetables, a fast vanishing breed (see last edition also), but so delightful to consult at the planning stage.

Now with the ferry arrival time in Scrabster, "All change for Thurso," as they used to cry, a serious decision has to be made. Either catch the first available train and spend the hours before the Sleeper's departure mooching about in Inverness with all the shops closed, or catch the later train, spend the hours in Thurso eating, drinking tea and visiting the museum, and then arrive in Inverness with approx 30 mins before the Sleeper leaves.

No need for decisions: the ferry was late. Phew! I had the "fall back" of the later train, and now the prospect of tea and cakes in Thurso to look forward to. Not so the other passengers, to say they were "all at sea" is really too trite and I really should have resisted it, but there was indeed real consternation. Consternation for missed connections onwards, onwards to South and home.

Oh I caught my Sleeper and arrived in London two hours late and with little available food on board, but that is another story.

This year a pal and I are off to Chatham to visit the National Lifeboat Museum. Naturally I was espousing the virtues of Senior Railcards and train travel. Once more the delights of planning and timetables to pass an idle winter's hour or two beckoned. But my pleasure was short lived and replaced by consternation. Oh what delights the Fates take in frustrating the labours of man. Now the "fall back" train service, and I use the last heavy with sarcasm, arrives 15 mins AFTER the Sleeper has departed. With a cab booked in advance, the 30 mins between on time ferry arrival and train departure at Thurso can easily be accomplished. However now with no "fall back" train if the ferry is delayed, ("adverse weather", "leaves on the line", you know the sort of thing) it is far too close to call. So now anyone living North of Inverness is disadvantaged, should they wish to use the Sleeper service, and don't wish to pass the preceding waiting hours before departure in one of Inverness's fine hostleries.

"So how are you getting to....?" We are driving and flying! Herumph! (and using the Southern Railway when we get there).

I admit my tone may be "light", but that is for your benefit dear reader. The salient point is that if you want people to use the railway, so far as timetabling is concerned, it is not just the thinking that has to be joined up, but also the service offered. There, I have gone and used that "service" word again.

What a comfort it is to know that as you disappear into the bushes to answer a call of nature, due to the unstaffed station's facilities all being locked, an algorithm in Dunfermline is keeping an eye out for any suspicious platform behaviour.

Whilst the obvious enthusiasm and dedication of the staff of the Dunfermline Customer Service, as reported by Ian Budd in the last issue, is to be applauded, I hope that it is seen as an adjunct to, and not a replacement for, printed and displayed timetables. In an age where the answer to any question

can be obtained simply by “Googling” it I fear that the skills that were in the past learnt by being told to “go and look it up” will be lost. How often, when you consulted a dictionary to confirm the spelling of a word, were your eyes drawn further down the page to discover other curios? The exactitude of “Google”, whilst answering the immediate, negates the experience of discovery. The same applies to consulting timetables. (Viz. Mogg’s Cab Fares, Patterson’s Roads and of course Bradshaw.) Without even wishing to know it, one becomes aware maybe that perhaps the northbound trolley service terminates at Helmsdale in order that the Inverness return may be caught and the trolley operative can return home to Inverness (shades of The Mound catering car). A silly example I grant you, but by “looking” one can often discover possible alternatives and answers to questions one had never thought to ask, and certainly not ask when having a conversation with a “speak your weight” machine on a draughty station platform. The introduction of a remote intermediary, albeit with the best of intentions, between the question and the answer is not always the success one may hope for.

TRAINLINE TRAVESTY



At the end of March I was lucky enough to correspond with a computer. Having travelled from Glasgow to Swansea and back, and intending to write something about the train between Swansea and Crewe, I went onto the Trainline website to check some details. In passing I noticed that the distance given on the website for Swansea to Manchester (the train’s final destination) was 147 miles. Having lived in Cardiff, and travelled frequently to Swansea many years ago, this distance seemed much too short. I searched for “distance Swansea to Manchester”. This is clearly a difficult question as three random entries on the resulting page show:

<https://www.thetrainline.com> > train-times > swansea-to-manchester

Trains Swansea to Manchester from £44.90 - Trainline

It takes an average of 4h 29m to travel from Swansea to Manchester by train, over a distance of around 147 miles (236 km). There are normally 16 trains per day travelling from Swansea to Manchester and tickets for this journey start from £44.90 when you book in advance. First train. 04:30.

<https://www.rome2rio.com> > s > Manchester > Swansea

Manchester to Swansea - 4 ways to travel via train, car ... - Rome2rio

The distance between Manchester and Swansea is 215 miles. The road distance is 188.9 miles. Get driving directions How do I travel from Manchester to Swansea without a car? The best way to get from Manchester to Swansea without a car is to train which takes 4h 10m and costs £75 - £120. ...

<https://www.rome2rio.com> > s > Swansea > Manchester

Swansea to Manchester - 2 ways to travel via train, and car - Rome2rio

The distance between Swansea and Manchester is 148 miles. The road distance is 189.4 miles. Get driving directions How do I travel from Swansea to Manchester without a car? The best way to get from Swansea to Manchester without a car is to train which takes 4h 16m and costs £75 - £120. ...

This set me thinking about *our* railway, so I did a similar search for Wick to Inverness - sure enough the Trainline informs you that it is a journey of 78 miles. Worse than that, it states that there are “normally 8 trains per day travelling from Inverness to Wick” (Actually that’s 4 in each direction).

So I found a contact form on the website and sent this:

I’m the convener of the campaign group for the Far North Line, the Friends of the Far North Line (www.fofnl.org.uk). When checking journey distances on the website we can see that you use ‘as the crow flies’ numbers. Inverness-Wick by train is 162 miles but 78 as the crow flies. The journey time is 4hr 22min.

Inverness to Wick by train

It takes an average of 4h 22m to travel from Inverness to Wick by train, over a distance of around 78 miles (126 km). There are normally 8 trains per day travelling from Inverness to Wick and tickets for this journey start from £16 when you book in advance.

The train journey is slow but not 18 mph!!

A similar pointless distance of 147 miles is given for Swansea to Manchester. Why do you not give the distance by train? The information is readily available from Network Rail.

I fear that no-one will reply to this - please make me pleasantly surprised!

After a few hours I was delighted to receive a reply - but quite disappointed once I read it:

Swansea to Manchester by train

It takes an average of 4h 29m to travel from Swansea to Manchester by train, over a distance of around 147 miles (236 km). There are normally 16 trains per day travelling from Swansea to Manchester and tickets for this journey start from £39.40 when you book in advance.

Dear Ian,

Thank you for contacting Trainline. I hope you are doing well.

In order for me to assist you, I request you to kindly elaborate your concern so I may check this for you in the best possible manner.

Awaiting your response.

Kind regards,

Eliphia - Customer Service Representative

Now, doubting the intelligence of "Eliphia", I wrote a longer message [reading it back now I fear it's tone was a tad patronising]:

Dear Eliphia,

Thank you for getting back to me so quickly.

The reason for my message was that anyone looking for information on the Trainline website is likely to believe what they read and to draw conclusions from it. In normal everyday conversation when we talk about how far away something is, we are referring to the distance you have to travel to get from your starting point to your destination.

There are many places in the UK, and indeed probably most other countries, where the land route between places is much longer than the actual distance they are from each other. Wherever there is a wide river meeting the sea there are places which may only be one or two miles apart but the distance by road or rail is far more, unless there is a bridge.

People using the Trainline website are planning journeys. They will look at how long their journey is and how long the train will take. If they look at the two figures the website gives for each journey they will see how long the train takes to do the journey, and they'll see how far apart the places are 'as the crow flies', i.e. the straight line distance.

On the railway from Inverness to Wick for example, they will see that the places are 78 miles apart, yet the train takes an average of 4h 22m - that is an average speed of around 18 mph. No trains on the UK network travel that slowly yet the Trainline website makes it look as though they do. The actual distance the train travels is 174 miles, not 78. OK, it's a pretty slow train, but not 18 mph!

We try to encourage people to use trains, but your figures are likely to give people a completely wrong impression and put them off.

As far as I can see, all the distances given on the website are 'as the crow flies' - a completely pointless number, probably gathered from a Google search. Network Rail has all the distances available, why don't you just use those so that people know how far they will really be travelling?

For a hilarious example try this: Sheerness to Shoeburyness by train. 6 miles apart, typical train journey is around 3 hours.

I hope you now understand what I was trying to say, and I hope I haven't laboured the point too much! Please let me know if you still need clarification.

Best wishes, Ian

What's the distance between Sheerness-on-Sea and Shoeburyness by train?

Trains travelling from Sheerness-on-Sea to Shoeburyness cover a distance of around 6 miles (10 km) during the journey.

Undeterred by my tone, "Eliphia" replied the next day with this masterpiece:

Dear Ian,

Thank you for response & valuable insights on our website.

We comprehend your findings and observation and would like to apologize for the inconvenience you faced while trying to purchase your tickets with us.

I'd like to inform you that Trainline is a ticket retailing company that sells tickets on behalf of the train operating companies. The fares, ticket types, journey durations are solely decided by UK Rail Industry & respective train operating companies.

Owing to the same, I will definitely pass on your valuable feedback in regards to transparency as we do want our customers to use our services without being hassled. It is our constant endeavor to meet and exceed our customer's expectations to make our App/Website more user friendly. I sincerely hope you will give us another opportunity to serve you better in the future.

We thank you for your kind understanding and apologize for any miscommunication from our end.

Kind regards,

Eliphia- Customer Service Representative

Apart from laughing at the American spelling of 'apologise' and 'endeavour', and the fact that the computer thinks they only have one customer ("exceed our customer's expectations"), my main objection to this nonsense is the cheeky sign-off: "Eliphia- Customer Service Representative". It would be better for the Trainline's credibility if it had been honest enough to write something like "You will appreciate that we are saving money by using AI to deal with all customer enquiries."

The Trainline's view of the importance of dealing with the public could not be clearer. And their use of some automated distance query, to a database of "as the crow flies" distance figures, shows breathtaking incompetence. How could anyone think that telling customers Sheerness and Shoeburyness are 6 miles apart serves any useful purpose?

I read the second reply on the train to Inverness whilst travelling to a ScotRail meeting. I described the correspondence to a ScotRail official who was as surprised and disappointed as I was. They said they would get in touch with the Trainline to try and get it changed.

There is of course a serious point in this article, and the previous one - in the mad dash to save money by having passengers do everything online, service to the public takes a hit. Not everyone wants to use computers, tablets and phones, and in any case these may be temporarily unavailable mid-journey. And as this story of lamentable AI shows, computer output is only as good as its human design and input. Alienating passengers is never a good idea and in many cases may deter people completely from using the railway.

I hope that by the time you read this the Trainline's nonsense will have been removed.

Ian Budd

ALTNABREAC

NO NEWS IS...NO NEWS

www

*I was about to write a rather dull update on the situation at Altnabreac, saying that I've asked ScotRail for the latest news, and unusually, not received a reply. I was going to mention that the two people who live in the station house appeared in court, after an incident on 1 March, charged with various offences, including "maliciously interfering with the running of the railway track by standing on it and bringing trains to a halt", and have been bailed pending further court appearance, when I received a copy of an article written by FoFNL member **Mark Nolan** for the Collectors' Club of Great Britain magazine [some artistic licence allowed!]:*

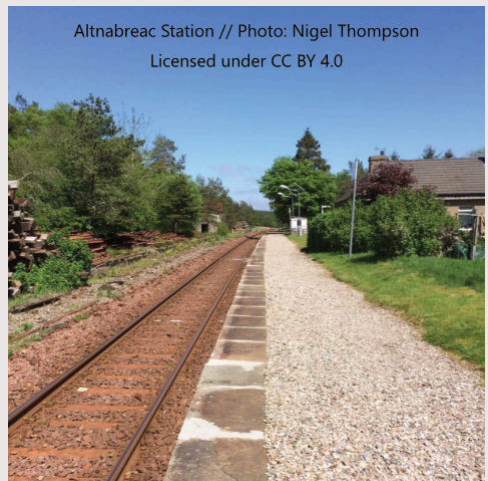
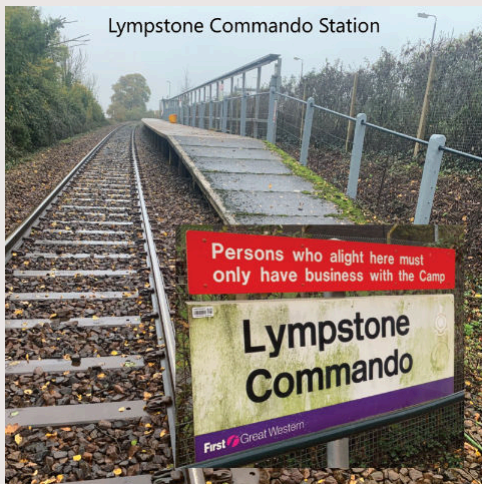
Britain has a total of 2563 railway stations. Well to be completely accurate, it's actually 2562 at the moment. What's that Sir Humphrey? Has the privatised-nationalised rail network managed to misplace a station? Well no, this is all rather embarrassing. There seems to be a dispute between ScotRail and the private individuals who own the station house as to who has access to the platform. We can get to the platform by train. (Well I should hope so.) But all our maintenance is done by road, and this station's up the end of a long, private one!

I suppose the lesson from this is: don't sell the flat above your shop if you need access to maintain the roof. The fact that the railway felt compelled to sell off their own infrastructure tells us just how much pressure they were under from Sir Humphrey to save money. It's a bit like people buying a house next to a village hall and then getting it shut down because there's noise of people enjoying themselves. "Hey, we bought a house on a station and trains keep stopping there".

While lawyers and courts untangle the mess, ScotRail has stopped stopping at the station. Hopefully they will stop not stopping at the station soon. Some 300 people a year used to alight there, which is quite impressive considering how stranded you are when you leave the train.

One of the strangest stations I've ever stopped at is Lympstone Commando on the line from Exeter to Exmouth. It has dire warnings that the area is restricted and if you get off the train, you will be unable to go anywhere (unless you're a genuine commando) and will be stuck on the platform until you are arrested or rescued by the next train.

Maybe the Commandos could pay a visit to Altnabreac one day.



PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Question S6W-23935: Paul Sweeney, MSP for Glasgow, Scottish Labour, answered 9 January 2024

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will revise the Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG) model for future rail infrastructure investment, in light of patronage projections for the reopening of Stow, Galashiels and Tweedbank stations on the Borders Railway reportedly having been underestimated for the first year of opening by, respectively, 313%, 330% and 681%. [This question also appeared in our January issue, before the answer had been given. Business case methodology is a prime concern for Highland railway projects.]

Fiona Hyslop: Transport Scotland keeps forecasting methodology under review to ensure best practice. The Borders Railway business case demand forecasts were based on modelling that was informed by surveys of residents regarding their potential use of the line. This resulted in forecasts that underestimated demand from Borders stations and overestimated demand from Midlothian stations.

Rail demand forecasting has developed considerably since the demand forecasts for the Borders Railway business case were first developed in 2008. A post-opening hindcast from the South East Scotland Transport Partnership (SEStran) Regional model for those Borders stations gave forecasts within 30% of actual demand. Where available, Transport Scotland recommends to promoters the use of Regional models for new station demand forecasts.

Question S6W-25776: Alex Rowley, MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife, Scottish Labour, answered on 6 March 2024

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S6W-24336 by Fiona Hyslop on 30 January 2024, whether it will provide an update on what progress is being made to replace the existing High Speed Train (HST) rolling stock, in light of the reported safety concerns of their ongoing operation.

Fiona Hyslop: High Speed Trains (HSTs) meet the stringent safety requirements necessary to operate on the GB rail network.

The independent railway safety regulator confirms these trains remain safe to run, which was also confirmed by the Scottish Carmont Steering Group

Replacing the HSTs is recognised as a priority and work is underway now to identify the optimum replacement option.

Questions taken in the Chamber, 14 March - Rail Development Projects

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): *To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has for any major rail development projects beyond the end of 2024. (S6O-03209)*

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Scottish ministers remain firmly committed to infrastructure investment as a key factor in securing economic growth and high-quality public infrastructure across Scotland. That has been made much harder due to cuts in our capital budget imposed by the United Kingdom Government.

The Scottish Government's investment in Network Rail's operations, maintenance and renewals for Scotland's railway will increase by £0.45 billion, from £3.75 billion in the 2019 to 2024 period to £4.2 billion throughout 2024 to 2029.

We continue to progress a pipeline of enhancement projects. Sue Webber may particularly note the planned electrification of the line from Glasgow to East Kilbride, which is targeted to be delivered by December 2025. [Perhaps significant that there's no mention of electrifying the HML etc]

CLASS 197



Photo: Phil Watkins

On a recent trip to Swansea I had the chance to sample the kind of train we need on the Far North Line now, but are probably going to have to wait many years to receive. These new Class 197 trains for Transport for Wales (TfW) were built by CAF in Spain and fitted out at the CAF works in Newport, South Wales. There are 2- and 3-car variants.

The Manchester-Swansea service in question was provided by the 2-car version of these diesel units, which are directly comparable with our 158s, having 1010bhp per unit, compared with the 700bhp of a Class 158. The trains were basically a comfortable environment, the large windows providing an excellent view. Interestingly, the original seat specification from the franchise holder and CAF was challenged, as the same seats used elsewhere had been described as like ironing boards. TfW eventually paid an extra £1.9m to have the trains fitted with higher-specification Fainsa Sophia seats.

However, the journey both ways was somewhat marred by the very loud setting of the P.A. system, which the conductor apparently can't control. This was exacerbated by the fact that TfW trains have all announcements in Welsh, then repeated in English, doubling their length. The announcements were so long and frequent that conversation was difficult. Let's hope ScotRail never decides to do dual language announcements.

The 2-car units have only one toilet - a recipe for precisely the disaster which befell the northbound service as it headed for Manchester. The toilet failed, so the unfortunate conductor had to explain this to the passengers and then give them instruction on where to find the station toilets at each stop, and a reminder to get back on as soon as possible. She had the unenviable job of checking that everyone who'd got off had got back on again. Of course this wouldn't have worked on the FNL since there is only one intermediate station with a toilet on the entire line, only open for part of the day.

The other issue on the services was the overcrowding. Until recently there would have been a locomotive-hauled set of four Mk4 coaches - there being only two led to a crush reminiscent of the London Tube at rush-hour. Apparently the service is meant to have 3-car units, but they are currently laid up with technical problems.

These trains, apart from the ill-advised minimal toilet provision, are definitely a step up from our 158s.

Ian Budd

FAIR FARES EVENTUALLY?

Transport Scotland's long anticipated Fair Fares Review was published in March 2024.

Anyone hoping to find answers to the conundrum of setting fares and fare structures will be disappointed. The purpose of the review is to rehearse all the reasons for the need to change from the present 'system' and to give opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of various methods which might be employed to improve the present chaotic situation. These are backed up, as you would expect, by many facts and figures.

The review's findings will inform discussions by those responsible for deciding what to do.

The review includes five interesting case studies, including ScotRail's suspension of peak fares and HITRANS' Go-Hi app, which allows finding, booking and paying for all travel in and around the Highlands and Islands.

The review concludes with **Recommendations and Actions**, divided into **Immediate to Short-term Actions** and **Medium to Long-term Recommendations and Actions**. Under the first heading, the report's intentions for rail include:



We expect ScotRail to deliver increased sales of intermodal tickets to pre-pandemic levels in 2024.

We will monitor and evaluate the ScotRail Peak Fares Removal Pilot which has been extended until June 2024, to inform medium to longer term rail fares reform.

We expect ScotRail and CalMac to develop a partnership agreement that will deliver a number of benefits for passengers including joint timetable development, and explore a future digital solution for 'Rail & Sail' tickets and improved collaborative working especially during disruption.

In the medium to long-term the review recommends improving efficiency and integration:

Rail fare structures are inevitably complex, reflecting the scale and complexity of the passenger network and the different nature of travel patterns and tickets appropriate for those. The ability to change this is further hampered because the structure of rail fares is reserved to the UK Government under current railway legislation. We will continue to press for full devolution of responsibility for rail, including fares, to facilitate changes focused on the requirements of Scottish passengers. Transport Scotland, working with partners, will develop proposals for a new fare offering aimed to encourage continued increase in rail market share, reflecting changing travel patterns and the needs of different markets for rail including commuting, business, leisure and tourism. This will inform considerations for a wider roll out of integrated ticketing, national/regional fare structures across all modes in Scotland.

The final section of the review lists options not being progressed, including "Expand eligibility for NCTS (National Concessionary Travel Scheme) to rail/ScotRail train services". The rationale behind ruling this out is:

For much of the population, the bus network provides better general connectivity than rail, especially for shorter journeys. The NCTS scheme and reimbursement rate for operators is based on the current deregulated bus system (with a large number of private operators). Extending the scheme to other modes (at scale) would distort the existing system (reducing the impact in terms of overall efficiency

and impacting potentially negatively on existing measures).

Where rail is a clear alternative to bus, extension of the NCTS to rail will impact negatively on the bus network with negative consequences for those who rely on it.

Estimated cost to include rail travel in existing NCTS is £65-135m per annum and is not considered financially sustainable in current Scottish Government fiscal environment so was also rejected on affordability grounds.

The whole review and its four supporting papers can be found on our website. It's worth quoting a couple of excerpts:

Supporting Paper 1: Public Transport System Analysis

Challenges

Public Transport capacity will require a step-change if a 20% reduction in car kilometres shifts to bus, active travel, and rail. If there is no reduction in overall travel, then the fall in car use will result in almost a tripling of other modes.

Opportunities

There is some evidence of changing travel demand / patterns post pandemic which could reduce pressure on busiest sections of public transport at peak times arguably delaying the need to invest in capacity expansion.

The combination of high inflation and a relatively weak economy has impacted dramatically on the economic wellbeing of the people of Scotland and the budget position of the Scottish Government, tied to decisions made in Westminster, has deteriorated significantly particularly in terms of the funds available for capital investment.

[...] transport has a key role in tackling the climate emergency. We have an ambitious target to reduce private car use by 20% by 2030 – essential to the meeting of our climate change goals – and public transport availability and price will play a critical role in moving towards this goal.

Supporting Paper 2: Case for Change

Covid-19 : Public Transport Patronage Recovery and Transition

Impacts on Government

Any retrenchment of the public transport network in response to falling passenger numbers / government subsidy will impact upon the ability to meet wider policy commitments e.g. the 20% reduction in car kms by 2030 requires an increase in public transport capacity by 222%.

Opportunity

As peak time demand for travel has not recovered to the same extent as off peak leisure travel there is an opportunity to test new fares structures which provide simplified fares that are valid and remain the same at any time.

Impacts on Operators

As any reduction in fares is likely to increase demand during the peak time there will be challenges for operators in ensuring there is sufficient capacity in order to meet this increased demand.

There may be an abstraction of passengers from bus to rail as rail becomes more price competitive with bus. Similarly, should the capacity considerations not be addressed, some rail passengers may switch from rail to car should services be overcrowded to an extent that impacts on the overall passenger experience.

Costs of using Public Transport relative to costs of using private car

Problem

The cost of public transport fares, UK-wide, rose in real terms between 2010 and 2020 – rail fares by 6% and bus fares by 26% above general inflation. Over the same time period, the cost of motoring fell by 9% in real terms. This has consequent impacts on the attractiveness of public transport compared to car travel not only for individual journeys, but also for longer term decisions related to owning and operating a car.

If the costs to use public transport are not financially attractive to passengers / potential passengers relative to the costs to use a private car then there will be adverse implications for public transport's modal share and the attainment of the target to reduce car kms by 20% by 2030.

Impacts on Government

There may need to be an upscaling of public transport provision in some parts of the country in order to provide a viable alternative to the car ahead of any demand management schemes being implemented.

Unintended consequences of existing fares structures on public transport landscape

Rail fares are extremely complex with a range of products (sometimes as many as ten fare types for one journey depending on where and when the journey is being made). To illustrate the complexity, in the fares system there are in excess of 150,000 origin/destination pairings, each with several ticket types that are priced by ScotRail as Lead Operator.

In addition to this, the fares structure is complex and there is no standardisation in the fares offered, the restrictions, the relationships between fares, or the fares themselves (in terms of a pence per mile measurement).

Passenger research has shown that confusion over buying the right ticket type is acting as a barrier to encouraging modal shift from car to rail.

Supporting Paper 4: International Benchmarking

Germany – 49 Euro Monthly Public Transport *Deutschlandticket*

The subscription only ticket provides unlimited travel on all local public and regional public transport including bus, tram, metro train and S-bahn.

The ticket is not valid on InterCity Express, InterCity, EuroCity (international) or FlixTrain (private operator) services.

Research undertaken by McKinsey on the 9 Euro precursor indicates:

- More than 40 per cent of German respondents purchased the ticket in the first month following the scheme's introduction
- A further 20 per cent indicated that they intended to purchase the ticket in July
- 71% of people surveyed in the United Kingdom would be interested in purchasing flat rate public transport tickets similar to Germany's offering

The fact that this supporting paper includes the German experiment is encouraging. A recent Transform Scotland report on the *Deutschlandticket* concludes that, despite the problems revealed, it shows much promise:



However, it has to be said that the ticket's undoubted success is by no means unqualified. It is claimed that the figure of around ten million people using the €49 subscription may sound like a lot at first, but actually means only one in eight Germans are using the ticket. In addition, more than half of the customers already had another, more expensive, season ticket and are therefore not new local

public transport users, but now simply travelling more cheaply.

It is also claimed that the price of €49 is too high. The ticket mainly relieves the burden on commuters but for young people and also many families it remains too expensive. It makes a big difference whether a family is spending multiples of €49 rather than €9 per person for a weekend trip, for example.

However, the answers to the problems which the ticket has revealed would appear to be relatively straightforward.

For the scheme to continue to expand there has to be an increase in transport capacity. The Federal Government of Germany and Deutsche Bahn (DB) have in fact unveiled the largest and most comprehensive infrastructure program for the railway network and stations since the railway reform of 1994.

In rural areas, public transport both in terms of buses and trains needs to be expanded to compete in terms of cost and reliability, and plans to re-open closed lines are in the pipeline.

The problem of the expense barriers to families could be overcome by a standardised nationwide ticket for less well-off people as well as an affordable offer for children and young people to give those on low incomes access to mobility and thus the social inclusion that they had with the 9-Euro-Ticket.

Reducing the cost of the ticket would also increase fairness and take-up, with research showing that €29 a month would be a price at which the highest sales could be expected.

The incentive to switch from car to public transport needs to be greater. Providing a good scheme whilst continuing to support schemes having the opposite effect makes little sense. In order to have a noticeable effect on the climate, the benefits afforded to car use need to be removed.

In Germany more than three times the cost of the *Deutschlandticket* is spent on environmentally damaging private motor vehicles in the form of a tax rebate on company cars, a commuter allowance, and a diesel subsidy. There is also a strong case for making public transport more attractive through improved reliability, punctuality and frequency of service.

Meanwhile, in the UK LNER has introduced a far more controversial attempt to improve its fares system. From 5 February "Our Simpler Fares pilot aims to make buying tickets even easier and give customers a better experience with just three ticket types" covering three destinations from London Kings Cross to Newcastle, Berwick-upon-Tweed and Edinburgh Waverley. The "70min Flex Ticket" has to be booked in advance, and requires seat reservation. A break of journey is not allowed. The booked train can be changed to one departing up to 70 mins before or after its leaving time - subject to seat availability. LNER advertises it as being cheaper than the Anytime ticket, but that is hardly a selling point since the Anytime ticket is always by far the most expensive option. For this pilot the existing off-peak fares are scrapped. For many possible journeys this represents a fare increase of well over 100%.

For a detailed analysis of this pilot it is worth reading Roger French's Bus & Train User blog (Roger is one of the speakers at this year's FoFNL AGM & Conference).



Perhaps this is good news for Lumo...

Turning to the ScotRail 9-month experiment of abolishing peak fares, Alastair Dalton, Transport Correspondent for *The Scotsman*, wrote about it in March. He quoted Fiona Hyslop MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Transport, "[Lack of] simplicity, and cost, are well-known barriers to travel. Rail fares are too complex



and continue to be stubbornly difficult to simplify for passengers, but the removal of peak fares is a bold initiative that demonstrates that we can take action."

Alex Hynes, Managing Director of Scotland's Railway, said the pilot was costing the equivalent of £60 million a year compared to its annual fare revenue of £325m, or 18 percent - "For ScotRail, it's a significant revenue loss, but it creates fabulous benefits for customers and the economy and society."

Politicians from all parties support the trial, as do rail trade unions. It remains to be seen whether it is considered affordable in the long term.

www



LMS poster, in Glasgow Central Station's tour museum, showing their simple cheap return fares

There are many views on how the present fares system could be improved. Pandora, our regular columnist wrote about the Japanese fares system in his response to the Rail Delivery Group's 2019 paper entitled *Easier fares for all*.

Pandora, May 2019 - <https://www.fofnl.org.uk/newsletters/19May/19may17.php>

Easier fares for all - <https://www.fofnl.org.uk/archives/RDG/Easier-fares-for-all.pdf>

Japan uses a fairly simple per km charge with supplements added for certain train types. At present the rates are around 10p/km for short distances and around 5p/km for longer journeys. The surcharge for journeys on Bullet Trains ranges from around £4.00 for short distances to around £57.00 for long distances. For Express Trains, they range from around £2.60 to around £21.00.

There is much for Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government to consider, and it seems unlikely that there will be any major change in the way rail fares in Scotland are determined for quite a long time. Let's hope that something radical and effective is decided upon.

Ian Budd

A9 VS HML

PLUS ÇA CHANGE

Whilst tidying up some of his working archive material, a FoFNL committee member stumbled across this uncannily relevant copy of *Modern Railways* magazine from nearly 40 years ago.

Firstly, the cover photo could easily be of a TGV flying along the Highland Main Line. In our dreams! The juxtaposition of the two 'cover lines' at the bottom is perfect.

Secondly, one of the cover lines refers to a long article about the Highland Main Line. It analyses in great detail the challenges faced by the railway.

And here we are, nearly 40 years later, looking at the same scenario, with the added dimension of another vast sum about to be spent on improving the road, when there is no genuine business case for doing so, when it is against government modal shift policy, and when it will use money which could have been spent on improving the far safer rail alternative.

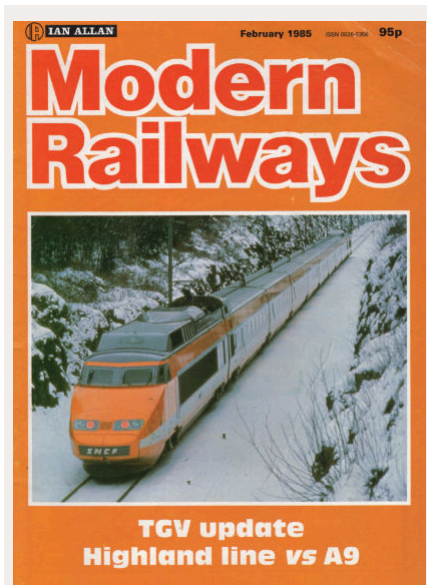
The intervening years have seen disappointingly little investment in the HML.

The basis of the 1985 article, *Highland Line vs A9*, is a cab ride *MR* Editor, James Abbott, had from Inverness to Perth, which he describes in some detail. *En route* he talks about the competition between road and rail in quite dramatic terms.

"Rail is fighting a bloody battle with coach operators for passengers on the Perth- Inverness route. James Abbott views the battlefield from a strategic vantage point — the cab of the *Highland Chieftain*, the train in the vanguard of British Rail's battle force."

As the train passed Moy, James was very aware of the parallel A9:

"Now there was evidence of the major investment going ahead in the main road running parallel to the Highland Main Line, the A9, with widened formations and unweathered concrete structures. It is the massive amounts of public money that have been lavished on the A9 (£237million is being spent on it between Perth and the Cromarty Firth) that have given BR so many headaches with the Highland line in recent years. The main problem has been that



since 'deregulation' of long-distance coaches under the 1980 Transport Act, coach operators have been able to fully exploit the improved infrastructure of the A9 (without paying a penny extra for the improvements — public service vehicle licence fees are often less than those for a private car), while BR has to compete with a tortuous 19th century alignment any improvement of which must be paid for out of the railways' own funds."

Nearly forty years later the same comments apply - perhaps even more so, since the widening of the road to dual carriageway is an even bigger, more expensive project than the 1980s upgrade, and the Scottish Government agrees that it will inevitably extract traffic from the railway, in direct contravention of its own policy.

"With the improvements to the A9 [...] there was an inversion of the pre-1980 position, where BR had been the long-distance carrier and road operators had provided local services, to one where the coaches were cleaning up on the trunk moneyspinners and leaving the trains the sweepings at the wayside stations."

James then goes on to describe British Rail's approach to prevent a complete collapse of

its business north of Perth, "ScotRail took the offensive".

"A strategy had to be evolved that would minimise the revenue loss, and here BR played the coach boys at their own game."

"An extra train was put on when loadings were heaviest, northwards on Friday afternoons, matching the coaches on price (£5) for Glasgow-Inverness journeys [rail £11.70], but the usual fare to intermediate stops. This may have seemed inequitable to passengers from the wayside stations, but there may be some justification for BR's argument that these communities should have been thankful for the maintenance of a public transport service. The *Jacobite*, as the train was called, showed the travelling public that BR was still very much in the market. Passengers still perceived BR to be the better bet on speed and comfort (even though with the latest models of coaches that may no longer be the case), and those that had deserted rail on price grounds returned. The *Jacobite* was kept for the 1984 season (but from Edinburgh rather than Glasgow and with the price upped to £6), and was one of the first trains to offer video entertainment. The more positive marketing of the Highland line exemplified by the introduction of the *Jacobite* proved the turning point of the rising against the coaches. Some of the smaller coach operators have been experiencing difficulties, and this has eased BR's task, although the road ahead should not be thought by any means easy."

At Perth James left the cab and continued south as an ordinary passenger, signing off thus:

"For me, it was a comfortable ride through lowland Scotland 'on the cushions'. For the Highland line to my back, the ride ahead in the battle with the A9 looks far from comfortable — but the outlook is much less bleak than it was two years ago. Initiatives such as the *Highland Chieftain* show that BR is not battle-weary but charged with adrenalin. May the best mode win."

I contacted James for his reaction to us finding his article:

"I was intrigued when I received an email from Ian referring to an article I wrote way back in the February 1985 issue of *Modern Railways*, which prompted me to wander over to the bookshelf to look the article up in my bound copy from that year and see what it was all about. The piece concerned a ride south in the cab of an

HST from Inverness forming the *Highland Chieftain* working, a service which had been introduced to the timetable in the previous May. I must confess that cab ride had slipped from my memory, but it was fascinating to read how my younger self had enjoyed a morning out at the head end of the *Chieftain*, with the magnificent highland scenery framing my ride to Perth."

"At the time coach competition was a hot topic, as the market was still adjusting following the deregulation of long-distance coaches under the 1980 Transport Act. My article described how ScotRail was striving to match coach fares of £5 between

Inverness and the Central Belt, prompting me to undertake some quick googling for a price comparison today. For a mid-morning departure in about three weeks' time, Flixbus was offering a bargain £5.99 single from Glasgow to Inverness, against a £28.30 advance ticket advertised on national rail enquiries. For comparison, an inflation indicator site says £5 in 1985 is worth £19 today. Thus road is now even cheaper than it was back then, and yet somehow the two modes both survive. More worrying for the railway in the longer term is the point that Ian makes: the money being lavished on the A9 is resulting in substantial betterment, while improvements to the Highland Main Line seem minor and occasional by comparison. But the *Highland Chieftain* has survived a traction change (although you struggle to find any reference to this romantic name for the 07.55 departure on the NRE and LNER booking sites), and long may it continue to charge southward!"

Scotrail Spectaculars

**BARGAIN
SINGLE TICKETS
between
INVERNESS AND
GLASGOW OR
EDINBURGH**
(available in either direction)

£5 **SECOND CLASS**

from 3 October 1983 until further notice.

Juveniles 5 and under 16 years half fare. Under 5's go free.

For full details see overleaf.

THIS IS ANOTHER SCOTRAIL SPECTACULAR OFFER.

WATCH FOR DETAILS OF MORE BARGAINS IN THE PRESS OR AT YOUR LOCAL STATION.



This is the age of the train

HIGHLAND AUTOBAHN

*This extraordinary suggestion from soon after WWII, is documented by **Keith Fenwick**, Editor of the Highland Railway Society Magazine.*

In 1954, Sir David Robertson, the MP for Sutherland and Caithness, put forward a plan to convert the railway from Inverness to Wick and Thurso into a motor road. This became known, at least unofficially, as the Highland Autobahn.

Sir David is an interesting character. His father came from Caithness but he was educated in Glasgow and trained as accountant and then served in the First World War. After the war he went into business, managing several companies in the developing frozen fish industry. Robertson was adopted in the Streatham constituency for the 1940 election as the sitting member was retiring. In the event he was elected unopposed at a by-election. In his maiden speech he raised the issue of facilities for troops at London's mainline stations. He complained that most had no facilities at all for troops to wash and sleep, and the facility at Liverpool Street station run by the YMCA was "like the Black Hole of Calcutta". Robertson's contribution produced an immediate move to improve conditions.

He moved to the Sutherland & Caithness constituency in 1950, defeating Sir Archibald Sinclair, the Liberal leader who had also been Secretary of State for Air in Churchill's coalition government. Robertson took great interest in constituency matters. In the late 1950s he became very critical of the government, describing the Scottish Secretary, John Maclay as "a Treasury lackey and a mouthpiece for officialdom". He resigned the Tory whip in 1959 but retained the seat as an independent in the election of October that year as the Conservatives did not put up a candidate due to his local popularity. He retired in 1964 and died in 1970.

One of his main concerns was the difficulties of road travel in the northern counties. Looking at the deserted railway line one day, he conceived the idea that it would be much better used if converted to a motor road. He prepared a memo which pointed to the current transport difficulties – roads of poor quality, dangerous with many hairpin bends, narrow and without foundations. The railway on the other hand was losing money heavily, the trains were dirty, infrequent, slow and expensive. The cure was for the government to spend much more money on road improvements. As a first step, the railway from Inverness to Wick and Thurso should be converted into a fast motor road on which horses, cyclists and all slow moving traffic would be excluded.

In 1955 Robertson obtained estimates from Balfour Beatty, which were produced by their Mr Hemingway and indicated that the cost for a 22ft wide road would be about £4.5m. BR would operate a road passenger and goods service. Journey time to Wick and Thurso would be about half the current duration, i.e. between 3 and 4 hours. The road would be free to all users, with access at existing stations. Stations would still be staffed to sell tickets and deal with freight.

The formation of 22ft, which consisted of an 18ft carriageway and two 2ft verges, would be obtained by lowering embankments and raising the bottoms of cuttings. Existing overbridges would not be



Sir David Robertson (Photo: Bassano Ltd)

National Portrait Gallery



widened; only a single lane would be provided at them. The existing viaduct at Invershin would carry a single track road. Existing road over-bridges would be altered to give additional headroom, while railway bridges would be widened although not strengthened. Removal of track was assumed to be undertaken by BR staff. No kerbs were included.

Robertson wrote to John Boyd-Carpenter, the Minister of Transport, on 19th July 1955 with his proposal which was passed on to civil servants to deal with. The immediate reaction was that 12ft lanes were needed, plus hard shoulders as adopted at that time for the M1, making the total width 49ft. All overbridges would have to be reconstructed as well as some underbridges. This put the total estimated cost up to £12m. The existing A9 was considered adequate for then current needs but plans were in hand for improvements, including dual carriageway as far as Dingwall, estimated to cost £8.25m over many years.

Robertson drummed up public support for his proposal with meetings at various places and it was mentioned in several newspapers. But an editorial in the Aberdeen Press & Journal on 8th July described Robertson as persistent and fertile in ideas; it concluded 'No quick acceptance of the idea need be expected but it should create intense interest'.

BR only had limited involvement in the discussions, but M P Beazley of the BTC did not think the project was worthwhile. It was up to Highways to decide whether such a road was justified, although the BTC 'would probably be very glad to be rid of the burden of this unprofitable line'. Beazley did think electric or diesel working with modern signalling would provide an efficient railway service but he said there was no evidence that the traffic justified that. It is strange that diesel working was dismissed, as the BTC Modernisation Plan had been published in January that year.

The civil servants continued for several weeks to draft a reply from the Minister to Sir David. The Scottish Office was asked for its opinion but its response was not recorded, although it was preparing to take over responsibility for Scottish roads from 1st April 1956. That of course meant that the proposed Autobahn had to compete with other major projects in Scotland such as upgrading the A94 and building the Forth Road Bridge.

There followed a long period of letters to and from Robertson. Finance and safety were raised, but there appears to have been no concerted effort for the two parties to come to an understanding. The Scottish officials took time to respond. In the autumn of 1956, the Scottish Secretary, James Stuart, had the bright idea of asking the Defence Ministry if it objected. The three services were asked and the matter came before the Chiefs of Staff Committee in February 1957. As an aside, it was the discovery of an entry in their Minutes, which are headed 'Top Secret. For UK Eyes Only. Not to be copied', that triggered this research. The military staff studied the use made of the line north of Inverness and concluded that it had no strategic value. A bit of a surprise coming only 12 years after the end of the War, and not the answer wanted.

So the Scottish Secretary was not let off the hook, but in the meantime Anthony Eden resigned as prime minister on 13th January 1957 as a result of the Suez Crisis. In Harold Macmillan's cabinet, John Scott MacLay became Scottish Secretary and there were three new Under Secretaries - Lord John Hope, Jack Nixon Browne and Niall Macpherson.

Sir David now turned his attention to promoting a North of Scotland Development Corporation which was intended to encourage industrial development in the towns in the north, but was not supported by the government nor by some MPs as it would have duplicated work being done by other public bodies. It was debated on 15th March 1957 but the Government talked out the private bill.

At this point, interest in the Highland Autobahn seems to have died down. The relevant papers were looked at again in 1962 and an internal memo of 10th October 1962 recorded that there did not seem to have been a 'rounding-off' letter from the Secretary of State. Sir David must have realised that his scheme had too many problems.

Reviewing all the files and newspaper reports, the proposals for and arguments against the scheme missed a number of important considerations. Much was made of the speed necessary to compensate for the longer distances. But maintaining an average of 50 – 60 mph would not have been practical with most motor vehicles in the mid-1950s. The national speed limit for lorries over 3 tons was only raised from 20 mph to 30 mph from 1st May 1957. Similarly many motor cars were not capable of travelling at high speed, and if they were, they were not necessarily capable of stopping in a reasonable distance.

One great advantage of the autobahn would have been that traffic on it would not have been hampered by town and village streets. Nor were bypasses mentioned in the plans for upgrading the existing A9 for which a need must surely have been apparent at the time.

Neither the proponents for, nor the opponents of, the scheme seemed to have considered how traffic would flow on the new road. There would have been a wide spread of vehicle speeds such that overtaking would have been common. While the railway track has no sharp bends, many sections have gentle curves which would have limited visibility. The proposal was made before double white lines were introduced; those unfamiliar with the road would have been at added danger of overtaking in unsafe places.

Road traffic conditions have altered radically in 70 years but one is left wondering whether the implementation of the scheme was properly evaluated by both Robertson and the civil servants. While it is understandable that Robertson thought in simplistic terms about his vision, the civil servants should have understood far better how roads function.

A part of the West Approach Road, Edinburgh - a former double-track section of railway. Barely room for a single carriageway road - this shows why it wouldn't have been simple to convert the single-track Far North Line.



Not the most desirable use for a railway bridge!

This is the Connel Bridge on the former Ballachulish branch near Oban. It used to be shared between rail and road traffic. Now a single-track road.

Photo: M J Richardson

Licensed by CC BY-SA 2.0

WICK IN WARTIME

www

Wick suffered aerial bombardment very early on in WWII. The first daylight bombing on the British mainland occurred on 1 July 1940 when two bombs destroyed four dwellings and four shops; 15 people were killed. The site is now a memorial garden. Residents of Wick had been accustomed to the sights and sounds of aerial raids since April 1940 when 60 bombers unsuccessfully attacked Scapa Flow in nearby Orkney.



This spectacular WWII photo of Wick shows intensive use of the sidings beside the station. No herring were landed at Wick during the war so the wagons were in other use. However, even in the 60s fish was still carried by rail. Iain MacDonald, FoFNL Committee member and retired signalman well remembers the fish trains: *There used to be one from Helmsdale at 03:05, I used to get a lift on it, and be handed the shovel to work my passage. That was in the early 1960's.*

Woe betide anyone who slept in and delayed it, there was a telegraph message sent out to the offending station to explain the delay, it usually ended, "repercussions all the way to London".

Ian Budd

AN EARLY ROYAL VISIT TO THURSO

*In the 150th Anniversary year of the opening of the Far North Line to Thurso and Wick this fascinating article by **Henrietta Munro** deserves to be reprinted. It first appeared in the Caithness Field Club Bulletin in April 1984 and can now be found on the caithness.org website.*

In 1874 the railway was opened from Inverness up to the north - largely financed by the Earl of Caithness and the Duke of Sutherland. So what more natural that the Prince and Princess of Wales, who were paying their first visit to the north and were staying at Dunrobin with the Duke and Duchess - they should pay a flying visit to the most northerly town on the British mainland. And so it was arranged.

At that time Thurso was the only town in the north of Scotland which adopted the Free Libraries Act - the library consisted of about 2000 volumes and was largely used by the townsfolk. And so the inhabitants decided to add to the number of books available and also to have a small local museum. For this purpose they organised a great exhibition - such as was never seen in the north before. The venue decided upon was the old Free Church in Traill Street (now Miller Calder's shop) as this would need very little interior alteration.

When it was known that the Prince and Princess of Wales were to be at Dunrobin and that they might visit Sir Tollemache Sinclair at Thurso Castle, the organisers of the exhibition asked Sir Tollemache if it would be possible for the Royal couple to perform the opening ceremony. And so that was arranged. And an even bigger and better exhibition was arranged. Paintings formed the chief part, mostly contributed by Sir Tollemache, the Earl of Caithness and the Duke of Sutherland as well as by a number of local gentlemen. Many were copies but a few originals come from South Kensington Museum. Glass cases were made and filled with geological samples and items of local interest. Crafts were represented by wrought flagstone cabinet work, and sewn work in both wool end silk. There was a large collection of stuffed birds and two fine stuffed salmon, one of 50lbs. and one of 42lbs., both caught in the River Thurso.

And now after all the preparations the great day arrived. Their Royal Highnesses arrived by special train from Dunrobin Castle about 2 p.m. I understand that it was then that the lovely little station was built at Dunrobin - this was in use until before the Second World War and the building still stands. [That original building was actually replaced in 1902 by the current one, designed in the Arts and Crafts style by L. Bisset for the 4th Duke] The Royal couple accompanied by the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland, Lady Florence Gower, Prince John of Gluckenburg, Lord Aylesford, Lord Charles Beresford, Sir Augustus and Lady Paget, Colonel Teesdale, Mr. and Miss Knollys, Captain Glyn, Mr. Montague and Mr. Cockerel. In charge of the train were Mr. Dougal, manager of the Highland Railway, Mr. Jones, locomotive engineer and Mr. Paterson, resident engineer. The Prince of Wales and the Duke of Sutherland travelled in the engine all the way. Imagine! A real train elegantly painted in the livery of the old Highland railway and a Royal prince and princess at Thurso Station. No wonder the Rifle Volunteers were drawn up as a guard of honour and the platform laid with crimson cloth.



The original station building at Dunrobin

As the train arrived the volunteer band played "God Bless the Prince of Wales" and as the Prince descended to the platform there was a hearty cheer from the waiting crowd. Mr. Henderson, convener of the County and Mr. Bremner, Chief Magistrate of Thurso were presented by the Earl of Caithness and both read addresses of welcome. Then the Princess took the arm of the Earl of

Caithness while the Prince escorted the Duchess of Sutherland and with the rest of the party following, they took their seats in the open carriage with the Duchess of Sutherland and Sir Tollemache Sinclair - the Prince wore a kilt of Sutherland tartan and the Princess wore a richly trimmed grey dress. When the procession moved off, led by the volunteer band, the Freemasons of Wick and Thurso, along with the magistrates and authorities of the Burgh followed on.

The street decorations were arranged by Messrs. Tyser & Co. of Manchester and appeared to be very splendid. Unfortunately while the Illustrated London News had prints of the wonderful decorations in Golspie, there are none of the Thurso scene but it is described as follows: Venetian masts in crimson cloth were placed at regular intervals from which festoons hung while every house on the route exhibited flags. The front of the exhibition building was draped and relieved by heraldic devices and plumes of feathers. The railway station was highly ornamented with heraldic devices, shields and flags. All round Macdonald Square (now Sir John Square) were Venetian masts joined together with streamers in various colours while a Gothic arch was placed at the top of Caithness Street (now Sir George Street). One wonders if Messrs. Tyser had just either finished a Venetian exhibition or had just furnished the stage for *The Gondoliers!*

The procession went straight from the station to the exhibition where the Prince made no speech but formally declared the exhibition open. The party remained for a short time looking around the room and then went directly to Thurso Castle for refreshments with Sir Tollemache. A public banquet was held in the Town Hall with Baillie Tait in the chair and the usual Loyal toasts were drunk.

The Prince started on his return journey to Dunrobin about 4 o'clock and the town was brilliantly illuminated in the evening.

At the time of the opening of the railway The Illustrated London News took the opportunity of publishing several etchings of the northern area - it looks rather strange to us to see prints of Duncansby Stacks and Kirkwall Cathedral with the caption 'At the Opening of the Highland Railway'.

When the railway was opened first, and for many years after that, each of the directors had his own key to open a carriage which he kept for himself. I still have a key and identity card belonging to a local gentleman who was one of the directors. But I do not suppose it would do me any good today.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Advertising Trains

FoFNL is grateful/proud to be one of a number of organisations considered to be "critical friends" by ScotRail/Scotland's Railway and by Transport Scotland.

In that spirit, I would like to make a further plea for the restoration of up to date timetable posters at stations.

I asked about this at the FoFNL AGM in Helmsdale last summer. Chris Gibb, immediate past CEO of Scottish Rail Holdings talked about the many copies of pocket timetables which went to waste. We understood all that, but my point was not answered.

Despite the power of advertising, ScotRail's information vacuum continues and revenue is lost. Many folk do not have electronic gadgets

and others would not go to the length of using the platform help point if they even know it exists.

Consider tourists stopping at Achnasheen for the toilets. If they could see a timetable on display they might be tempted to make a spur of the moment train trip to Kyle to walk over the bridge to Skye and know they could get back at a convenient time. No timetable? No extra passengers that day.

Many folk are disappointed that they cannot just go and check the train times at the station and work out all the possibilities for themselves.

Matlock even had two timetables – current and future, the latter starting a fortnight after I was there in early May. ScotRail please copy!

Richard Ardern, Inverness

OUT & ABOUT WITH SANDY COLLEY

FoFNL's resident photographer braved the weather in April to find interesting subjects.

[Above] 'Black 5s' 44871 and 45407 on the *Great Britain XVI* tour coming out of Culloden Wood on the approach to Inverness on 16 April. It is now an unbelievable 56 years since 1945-built 44871 was one of four locomotives used on the famous "Fifteen Guinea Special" on Sun 11 August 1968 marking the end of British Rail steam.

[Right] *Royal Scotsman* observation car at Inverness on 4 April. Originally built as a Pullman kitchen car in 1960 it received its 'verandah' around 1990. It underwent major internal repairs after the shunting incident with *Flying Scotsman* at Aviemore last year.

[Below] 66413 in yet another livery in Inverness yard on 14 April on the rear of an engineers' train bound for Tain.

