# Far North Express

FoFNL

The Friends of the Far North Line

Issue 95
May 2025


The Magazine of the Friends of the Far North Line

**For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland**

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

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# Contents



**www.fofnl.org.uk/fne95.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




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.

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**Front cover:** 158719 was re-liveried to mark the opening of the Leven branch to passengers. Here the brightly coloured unit is seen calling at Brora as the 06:18 Wick to Inverness on Monday 24 March. Photo: **Mike Wedgewood**

## 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.

The bank is now charging **50p** for each cheque paid in - please consider **BACS** or a **Standing Order**.

# Headcode

**As the setting up of Great British Railways** gains momentum, we're devoting quite a lot of space in this *Far North Express* to the issues raised.

The Department for Transport (DfT) produced a fairly detailed consultation document in February and we are publishing Transform Scotland's response to this in full.

There is also an article written for *The Herald* by Jonathan Pugh, who is a rail and policy expert with more than 35 years of experience working across the railway industry. He laments, as we often do, the time it takes for anything rail-related to be decided upon.

With that thought in mind, Richard Ardern has compiled a list of headlines demonstrating for how long the issue of Highland rail services has been ignored. The list will be contained in this issue's companion page on our website.

In 2006 the *Highland Rail Room for Growth Study* was published. It explained in great detail the improvements needed for all the railways in the Highlands. Its suggestions featured in the 2008 *Strategic Transport Projects Review* and promises were made. Nineteen years later and very little has been done. We are of course delighted that a substantial sum is being spent on track renewal on the FNL in June; this is most welcome, but is maintenance, not new infrastructure. The problems identified remain. It seems there is no political will in Scotland to tackle these problems and the railway services remain in a time warp as the rolling stock gradually deteriorates, with no sign of replacement for the Class 158 (and 156 on the West Highland) units.

For a time there was hope, as the momentum from the declaration of a Climate Emergency put modal shift to rail, and "decarbonisation" of the fleet, in the spotlight. Ambitious targets were declared.

As we enter the last year of the present government its members have little incentive to embark on big projects which they have no chance of seeing through to completion, and the targets have been relaxed and/or abandoned. External factors have caused the money supply to diminish and the Scottish Government does not have the borrowing powers available to independent countries for capital projects.

However, in this context it's impossible not to mention the A9 dualling. One wonders how on earth money, and a "business case", can be found for an unjustifiably lavish road project, but not for tackling the Highlands Railway Deficit.

Instead of being afraid of campaigners, including some of their own members, and influenced by dubious statistics, the Scottish Government should just have fixed the dangerous junctions on the A9 years ago. This would have saved lives already and been far cheaper than dualling. Money might then have been available to fulfil promises made for rail.

**Ian Budd**

## 2025 AGM & Conference

This year's AGM & Conference will be held in Wick on **Friday 4 July**. Starting with the AGM at **12:00**, we will be in the **Norseman Hotel**.

Our speakers will be

- **Hannah Ross**, CEO, Scottish Rail Holdings
- **Alan Ross**, Director Engineering and Asset Management, Network Rail
- **Lee Ross**, Infrastructure Maintenance Delivery Manager, Perth, also from Network Rail.

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# Pandora...

## ...injects some reality

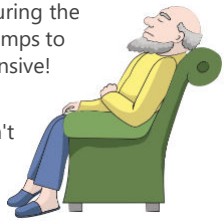
**Ruth Cadbury MP**, Chair of the House of Commons Transport Committee, wants the Government "to commit to setting out a road map within 12 months that details how it will meet its timescales for achieving independent accessibility across the rail network". (*RAIL* 1032, p12)

It's hard to know where to start, though a road-based metaphor probably isn't too clever. The laudable aim, of course, is that any passenger, however restricted in their mobility, should be able to get on or off any train at any station without needing assistance. That's defined the destination - now let's look at where we're starting from. We're pretty good nowadays in providing step-free access from the outside world to the platform. That's where the fun starts.

There are roughly 2500 stations. Most of them have two platforms. Some have more while a small number have lots more. But there are lots of stations with only one: for every Waterloo or Waverley there is a Golspie or - amazingly - a Hartlepool. We won't be far out if we say that there are a bit over 5000 platform edges. Most of these were constructed well over 100 years ago with little or no thought about how competing railways were building theirs: standards didn't exist apart from the rails being the same distance apart. But a bunch of MPs wants the industry to devise, within 12 months (*far* less time than they will take to bring GBR into existence) a plan (no nasty road-based metaphor for me) in effect to make the whole lot the same height within a centimetre or two.

While the engineers are busy with their concrete mixers (after the boys have been out with their measuring tapes) there remains the small problem that not all carriage doors are at the same height off the rail. Readers need travel only as far as West London where Piccadilly and District lines use the same stations. The former are much lower and quite a large step down is needed (or up, if one is getting off). Given the dozens of billions needed His Majesty's Treasury is unlikely to see much point in taking any of this further, and it's strange that they haven't said so.

While access to the railway is something we should all wish to see improved, there are quicker ways of making it happen. Properly staffed stations - all of them during the hours when a train is scheduled - each equipped with the half-dozen or so ramps to cope with the range of rolling stock likely to call. Preposterously expensive! Stupid suggestion! And Ruth Cadbury's isn't?



Mind you, a few Harrington Humps would be worth investing in, wouldn't they? Now that Dunkeld & Birnam (to give it its Sunday name) is being attended to, a couple at another difficult station would show - yet again - that Transport Scotland and ScotRail are in the vanguard of innovation.

## Later Evening Services

**There was good news** in the May timetable for passengers wishing to return home from Inverness on a late evening train. On Fridays and Saturdays (FSO) from 23/24 May there will be a 23:12 departure from Inverness, terminating at Tain at 00:28.

Late evening services on the FNL had been suspended since Covid. The successful 22:15 service to Elgin, introduced last December, has shown passengers' wish for late evening services. ScotRail is now considering extending the FSO Tain service to the remaining weekdays.

Unfortunately, due to frequent anti-social behaviour on the short-lived late Tain to Muir of Ord FSO service, this will not be reinstated.

# FNL Track Renewal

**As we reported** in the January edition of *Far North Express*, the railway north of Dingwall is to be completely closed from 8 to 30 June to allow an £11.5m maintenance and improvement project on the track.

Network Rail will refurbish almost five miles of track between Brora and Helmsdale, replacing old or worn components and ensuring that the rails, sleepers and ballast are fit for purpose. Nearly nine miles track between Invergordon and Fearn is to be replaced, as well as other vital work to inspect bridges and culverts, clear lineside drainage and ditches, and repair the surfaces of level crossings.

This kind of work needs full continuous possession while it is carried out. A decision was required about how to achieve the shortest possible line closure and likely weather and daylight hours pointed to June, even though this is the beginning of the main tourist season.

Network Rail and ScotRail are well aware that lengthy line closures are not popular. As Ross Moran, route director at Network Rail Scotland, said, "There's never an easy time to close the line, but we know the majority of passengers prefer one continuous period like this, rather than overnight and weekend closures across a much longer timeframe"

He pointed out that some components on the track are nearly 100 years old and that once the work is complete journeys will be much smoother and more reliable.

FoFNL is delighted that this essential work is being done and hopes that renewed focus on the line will speed up decisions to invest in some much-needed extra infrastructure, such as a new passing loop at Delmore, along with consideration of where else to do this to break up what are currently among the UK's longest stretches between loops.

Network Rail has promised to contribute a feature article for our next issue showing what this project involved.

Of course, whatever decisions railway operators take, reactions from the public will vary. The *Rossshire Journal* published a selection of comments posted on social media by its readers after it reported the line closure:

"Why don't they do this in the winter when the number of passengers is presumably less?"

"Clearly you know very little about the construction industry, or you would know that mild weather is essential to many elements of work and longer hours of daylight enable more work to be done each day thus reducing the timescale required to complete the works. Traditionally June is one of the driest and least storm prone months. The planning makes perfect sense."

And... "There's too many 'railway maintenance experts' live down south who understand diddly squat about life north of Perth."

"Summer? Why? Tourists travel by train! WAKE UP!"

"Tourists?! That's your concern? I'm more concerned about people who LIVE here getting to work etc. Common sense says you do the work in the days with longest daylight."

And... "As far as people saying waste of money, do you live up here? We need this line and the essential works, so mind your own business.

Pretty typical social media exchanges really, but it's good to see uninformed comments challenged.

**Ian Budd**

# Fast Broadband Approaching

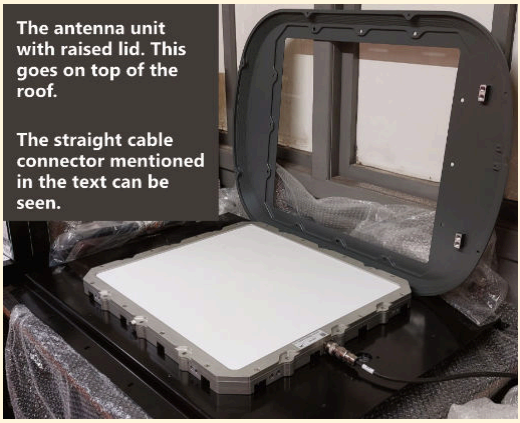
www

Steven Sutherland about to board...

**I was delighted** to receive an invitation from Dr. Robert Gardner, who spoke to us at last year's conference, to accompany him on a visit to Inverness Traction Maintenance Depot (TMD) to be shown progress on equipment installation for the imminent trail of satellite broadband on the Far North Line - a project jointly funded by ScotRail and the Scottish Government Digital Directorate.

Alan Manclark, ScotRail's Head of IT, organised everything and showed us around on 7 April. Steven Sutherland (On Board Equipment Engineer) was happy to answer all our questions about installation. Also present from ScotRail were Matthew Lawson, IT Network Infrastructure Technology Specialist and Richard Brown, Senior Fleet Engineer.

It's fair to say that home computer users will have little difficulty understanding the basic requirements for providing an internet service on a train. In our homes we have a router/hub supplied by our internet provider which is directly connected to their network. On the train this connection is provided by a specially designed antenna mounted on the roof of one of the train carriages which is in constant communication with the orbiting satellites.


**The antenna unit with raised lid. This goes on top of the roof.**

**The straight cable connector mentioned in the text can be seen.**

Just like in our homes, the train requires a router, so this is installed in the ceiling cavity below the antenna to receive its signal.

Our home router is able to broadcast the data directly to our computers or tablets and phones wirelessly, but on a train connectivity needs to be distributed along its length using special inter-carriage data links. The router is connected by wire to data network switches at the end of each vehicle. A Wi-Fi access point in each carriage feeds two ceiling-mounted antennae for passenger use and is plugged into one of the switches.

Another huge advantages of giving the train fast internet access is the opportunity to divert the automatically generated technical reports which the train produces in real time, through the switches and router to the satellites. This promises more effective maintenance and repair planning as any developing faults will be known about at the depot as they occur.

A switch unit (blue band) and the router (orange bands) occupying some of the limited space between the ceiling and the roof.

It's exciting to see Dr. Gardner's original idea being put into practice. Prior to working for the Scottish Futures Trust he was Senior Innovation Engineer (Telecoms) with Network Rail. He realised in 2019 that the rapid expansion of satellite broadband offered game-changing opportunities for rail, especially at a time when the current GSM-R (Global System for Mobile Communications – Railway) which is based on 2G cellular network technology dating from the 1990s, is being replaced by FRMCS (Future Radio Mobile Communication System), based on fast 5G technology.

He could see that not only could low earth orbit satellite broadband give very high-speed internet connection to passengers, it could also provide connection using FRMCS protocols which has the possibility to include in-cab signalling and train control. The customer Help Point at Corrour on the West Highland Line is already connected to a Starlink satellite receiver. This shows the way forward for much land-based infrastructure, such as Customer Information Screens, which will be able to hook in to the satellite system. We're delighted to see how ScotRail has taken Robert's idea on board and run with it.

Application of satellite technology for rail is very new. Bathgate-based Clarus Networks, in conjunction with SpaceX/Starlink, developed the satellite panels for railway use and took them through full rail vehicle certification, achieved in November 2024.

Whilst initially this project will provide a fast and reliable internet connection for passengers, it has the promise of conferring benefits in many aspects of running the railway, which will assist greatly in justifying its cost - a surprisingly low five-figure sum per train.


Access point, wireless antenna and power supply unit ready for installation.

As with all new technological equipment, prices will fall. Time spent retro-fitting each train will be much reduced as knowledge gleaned from the first installation is applied. New-build trains will be designed to include space for the equipment and it's possible satellite broadband might become part of the specification during rolling stock procurement.

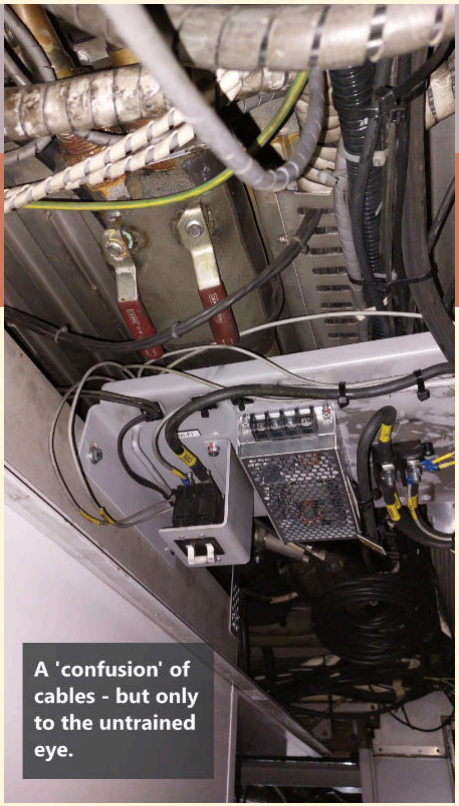
**Our tour began** in a small room where we were shown a fully-working train system built into a shelving unit for testing purposes - complete with RETB equipment enabling the unit pretend to the signalling system to be a train.

After being shown some of the components laid out ready for installation we climbed aboard 158725 where Steven Sutherland (On Board Equipment Engineer) talked us through the daunting intricacies of retro-fitting.

This is where Steven faces the practical challenges. There is limited space on the train above and behind various panels and hatches, which is already occupied by all the things a train needs. Beside the existing sim-based mobile equipment there is lighting, air-conditioning, power and internal communications, all vying for the limited space, into which Steven has to insert quite bulky items and thick cables.

Often it comes down to making decisions about how to maintain the integrity of the cover panels by keeping existing items such as switch covers in the same place while linking all the new things together. Sometimes it's as simple as sourcing a right-angled cable connector to replace the supplied straight one. An example of this can be seen in the photo of the roof antenna on page 6, where the cable coming out of the end has to be routed down a hole in the mounting plate, which has to be where it is because of what's already in the ceiling cavity below.

Test rig



A 'confusion' of cables - but only to the untrained eye.

There is a rapidly approaching deadline for all this work as the official public launch of the trial is expected in the middle of May.

158725 will be ready by then and the other five units allocated for the trial will follow as each is completed.

We're looking forward not only to trying out the high-speed broadband, but to hearing the reaction of passengers as they enjoy it.

**Ian Budd**

# Angus Stewart

Soon after losing Malcolm Wood, one of our long-standing committee members, we heard that our Membership Secretary, Angus Stewart, passed away on 31 January. His health had declined rapidly towards the end of 2024, but he remained at the helm of membership matters as long as he could.

In the January 2006 edition [Issue 36] of *FNE* a page of "Pen Portraits" of FoFNL Committee members said of Angus:

*Angus has had a passion for railways all his life with a special interest in freight. He has watched and photographed the changes in the railway scene for many years. Since retiring from his employment with the gas industry he has taken many holidays at home and abroad pursuing his hobby. He is also a keen railway modeller and is at present the secretary of Glenrothes Model Railway Club helping to organise their annual show in May each year and also attending other shows with layouts. His special modelling interest is German Railways.*

I've received many comments from people who knew Angus, often for a very long time.

Ron Stevenson wrote "I was Treasurer to FoFNL for several years just after the turn of the century and thus got to know him well. A most knowledgable man he was, particularly on railway goods matters and an affable, straightforward, honest and comradely man. He and his redoubtable wife Janice were as fine a couple as you could ever hope to meet."

Simon Bush, FoFNL member, commented that 24 years in supporting the society will be a wonderful legacy for his life and the Far North Line.

I had a long conversation with Arran Aird, a long-standing friend of Angus. They had known each other for several decades and had shared a special interest in rail freight. This often involved expeditions to witness events of significance for freight, such as seeing the inaugural train using the reopened sidings at Kyle of Lochalsh. They were both members of the St Andrews Railway & Transport Society for over 30 years.

Arran talked about Angus' history, from choosing to join the Army, rather than being called up for National Service, continuing with the Territorials after leaving while working for the Gas Board, to his family life and dedication to railways real and modelled.

Angus' wife Janice, who died in 2021, was also involved in FoFNL, having been treasurer in 2007/8. They had two sons, Duncan and Gregor and kept Boxer dogs for many years. Angus and Janice had three grandchildren: Carol, Kyle and Chloe, and a great grandchild, Brodie, was born last year.

We will remember Angus as a steadfast committee member and membership secretary who, in line with his army history, always wanted things done properly.

**Ian Budd**


Seen here, standing in front of the lorry, Angus watches timber being loaded onto BTA wagons on the newly-reopened siding at Kyle of Lochalsh Station.

**Photo: Arran Aird**

# Forty Years of RETB

*2025 marks 40 years of RETB on the Far North Line. So I was delighted to receive a digital copy of the pamphlet produced by Scotrail to mark its introduction and explain the technology. Graeme Mackay, one of our members, found a copy when tidying his loft and knew I'd be interested.*

*As an introduction to reproducing the pamphlet in full I asked **Iain MacDonald**, one of our long-standing committee members, for his personal recollections as a signalman during the transfer from conventional signalling to RETB:*

**We had had a very severe storm** previously [1978] with many of the overhead wires brought down, so a system of getting the Key Token instruments to work by radio was developed which in turn gave rise to RETB signalling.

By the time of the public announcement, this system had been in use for around a year, alongside the normal Electric Token Block.

The trial proved to be quite successful, so in 1984 it was decided that the RETB system would be used from Dingwall to Kyle, and later the Wick /Thurso lines (two trains ran Wick-Georgemas and Thurso-Georgemas, combining to come south, splitting there on the northbound journey),

Now, who were the new signallers to be? The jobs were advertised as temporary as no 'marks' allocation* was available for the new system. I didn't fancy my chances of getting a decent job somewhere else at 48 years of age and I decided to apply. My colleague was extremely anxious about applying, I told him if he didn't he would be shovelling ballast! In the end he applied and we were both successful with our applications.

We started training in a mock-up, learning how to issue tokens etc but with no-one on the other end.

Once Dingwall to Kyle was working, attention turned to the Far North Line.

There, things didn't go well for the installation teams. Test Coach *Iris* was up and down the line, it being extremely difficult to get Lairg and Forsinard to work properly. This was near Christmas 1985 and Chris Green decided we'd go live with this at New Year. Commissioning morning was one to remember!


Photo: Roger Piercy

Inverness desk in 1998

The distillery level crossing at Invergordon caused me quite a bit of concern - it was busy but had no signals, only a crossing keeper paid by the distillery. It relied on the signaller telling the keeper to close the gates and the keeper confirming the crossing was closed. If the signaller forgot to phone, the trains ran at line speed through the level crossing. I made metal covers to put over the Invergordon button on the keyboard and marked it "Distillery L/C", I also made other covers to use when permanent way staff had the section by phone.

The very far north section was postponed and we were getting very bad publicity with the Press reporting that the trains were crawling along and no one knew where they were. The system was new and all the staff were inexperienced, but in the end we got there.

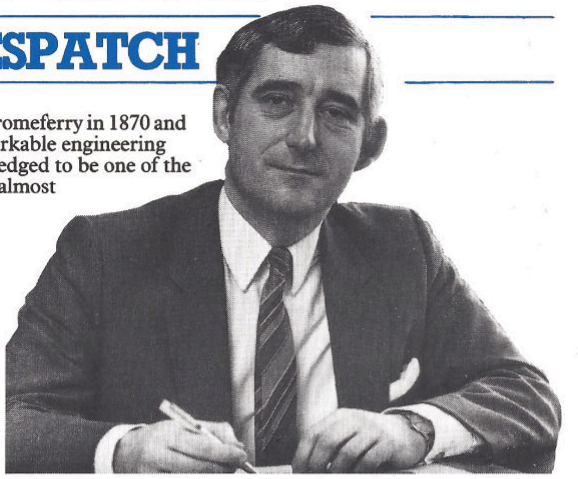
**On conventional signalling systems with manned signalboxes at many locations, the pay grades were determined by a 'marks' system where marks were allocated to each signalbox according to the number of trains being handled, lever movements, bell signals, train register entries, level crossings and shunting movements.*

# Scotrail
# Radio Train Despatch

## The End of an Era

# Scotrail

## RADIO TRAIN DESPATCH



The building of the railway from Inverness to Stromeferry in 1870 and its extension in 1896 to Kyle of Lochalsh was a remarkable engineering achievement. Today "The Line to Skye" is acknowledged to be one of the world's greatest railway routes — unrivalled for the almost magical enchantment of the ever changing vistas which it unfolds.

Alas, as we all know full well, that enchantment does not extend to the balance sheet. However aggressively it is promoted, the very remoteness of this line from population centres limits its capacity to generate sufficient year-round traffic to cover its costs. Scotland's beloved "Line to Skye" is, therefore, critically dependent upon external subsidy, however clearly that subsidy may be justified in terms of the social and economic importance of the line to the communities it serves and to the regional economy.

But the economic imperative, on which the future of the line must increasingly depend, is clear and unequivocal. Costs must be reduced!

That imperative is not unique to the "Line to Skye". It applies throughout British Rail and, particularly, to rural lines. What may prove to be a substantial part of the answer is, for the time being, unique to this line. And, like the creation of the railway itself, it represents a considerable engineering achievement.

Developed with financial support from the EEC by British Rail's Director of Signal & Telecommunications Engineering, backed by our Research and Development Department at Derby, it is a completely new system of signalling, called Radio Train Despatch, it is being introduced experimentally under operating conditions on the 63 miles of railway between Dingwall and Kyle of Lochalsh.

If it is successful this new system, which harnesses the very latest in microproccessor technology, offers the means of significantly reducing signalling costs on single track railway lines throughout the British Rail Network.

In view of the world interest focussed on this experiment, it is also, potentially, a source of considerable business for British Rail overseas.

Naturally, I am delighted that this particular route has been chosen for such a vital experiment which is consistent with the across-the-board range of improvements we are urgently seeking to introduce throughout the Scottish Region and British Rail as a whole.

It also reaffirms British Rail's commitment to do its utmost to safeguard the long term future of this line and of our passenger network in the Highlands.

I hope this pamphlet may help to explain how the new signalling system will operate.

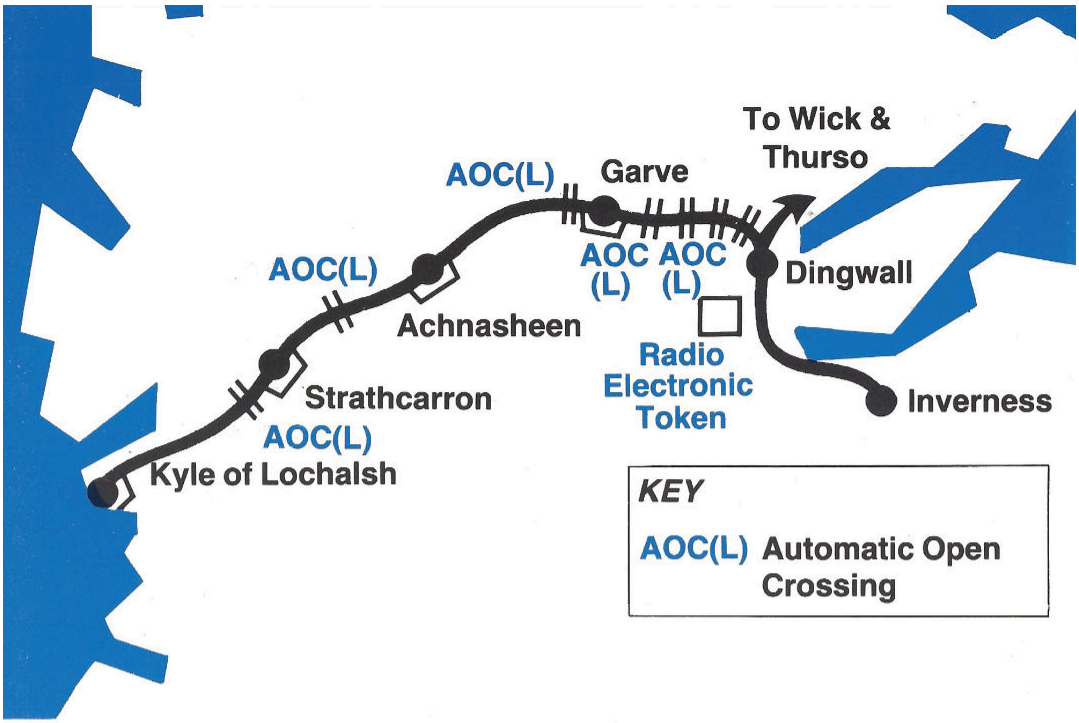
C. E. W. Green

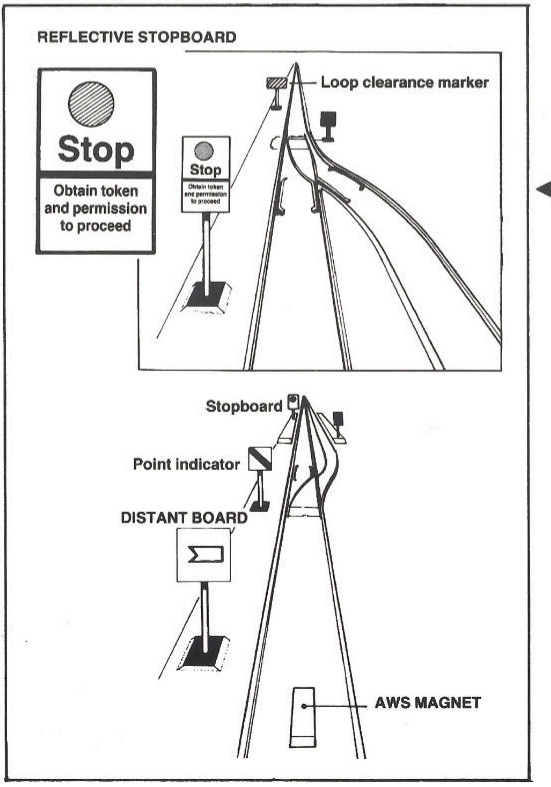
C. E. W. GREEN, *General Manager, Scotland.*

## WHAT IS RADIO TRAIN DESPATCH?

Radio Train Despatch (technically, known as "Radio Electronic Token Block" within British Rail) is a microprocessor-controlled radio signalling system being developed by British Rail to supersede the traditional "single line key token" system used extensively within British Rail and worldwide.

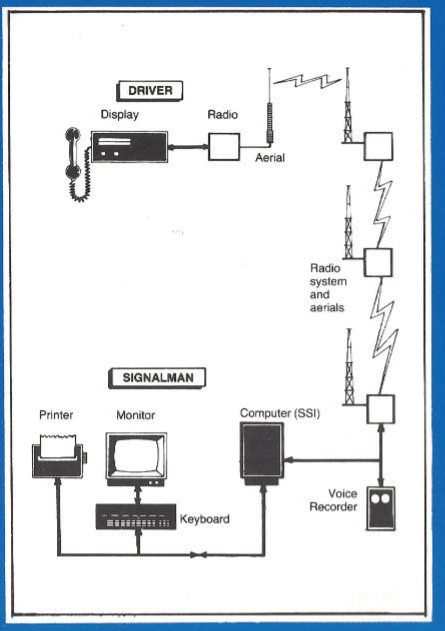
Basically the system comprises a microprocessor and radio equipped control centre covering a single line route (including the necessary loops or passing places on that route) and similar radio and microprocessor equipment installed in the cab of each locomotive using that route and unique to the particular locomotive. The radio equipment means that the driver can be in constant radio communication with control if necessary but the technological breakthrough is in the ingenious and completely tamper-proof microprocessor system which controls the access by individual trains, to successive stretches (or blocks) of single line track between any two passing places on the route. A specially coded signal must be received in the locomotive at the entry to the single line and at each passing loop thereafter before the train proceeds to the next "block" of single line track.



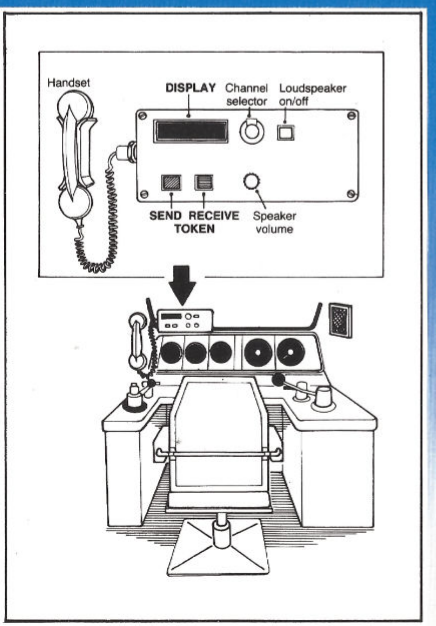

*Stopping in the loop.*

*View approaching the loop from the drivers cab.*

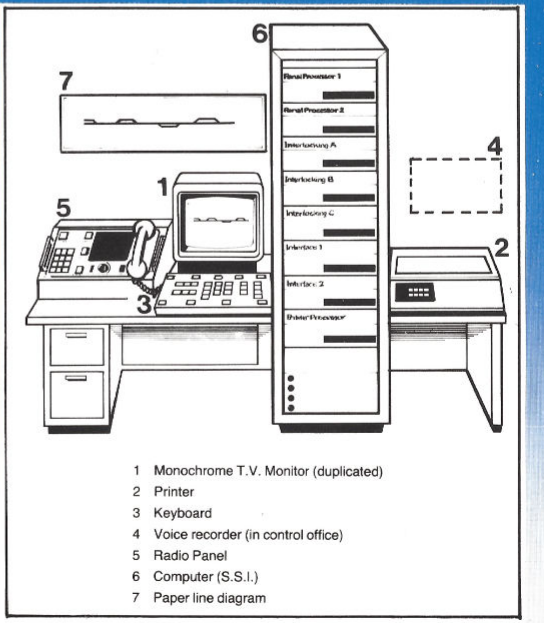



*Electronic Token block network. There may be more than one lineside aerial, depending on the length of the route and the quality of radio reception.*

*The train cab control unit.*




*The signalman's control console.*




1 Monochrome T.V. Monitor (duplicated)
2 Printer
3 Keyboard
4 Voice recorder (in control office)
5 Radio Panel
6 Computer (S.S.I.)
7 Paper line diagram

# How it works

This is best understood by looking first at the system it is intended to supersede.

The Dingwall/Kyle of Lochalsh line is 63 miles long, and because the original builders realised that traffic levels would never be high, only a single line was provided. Nowadays three intermediate loops allow trains coming in opposite directions to pass each other. Safety of the trains was absolutely ensured by installing a signalling system known as the "single line key token system". This ensured that the driver of a train could not proceed on to the single line until the signalman had given him a large key made of brass (the "key token") which he would remove from the "key token instrument" in his signal box. These "key token instruments" were electrically interlocked in such a way that a second train could not obtain a key to proceed on a line already occupied by a train until the issued "key token" was replaced in the "key token instrument" in the signal box ahead.

# How it will operate

Recent dramatic developments in microprocessor technology and mobile radio systems have allowed a completely new concept in signalling and communications to be developed. The microprocessor has reached the stage where not only can it be utilised as a signalling device, but also it can have inbuilt safety and security systems that ensure that the overall safety level is as high as with the key token system it replaces.

By combining microprocessor and mobile radio, there is no longer a need for lineside signalling equipment or for a signalman at each passing loop. One signalman at Dingwall can control the line to Kyle of Lochalsh whilst three passing loops at Garve, Achnasheen and Strathcarron suffice for traffic levels on the Kyle line. Other lines with a greater number of passing loops could still be controlled by one person.

The familiar lineside signalboxes with their multiplicity of levers for controlling the points and signals and the red painted key token instruments from which the signalman obtains the brass key to hand to the driver will vanish. A microprocessor in the one remaining signalbox, at Dingwall, will ensure the safety of the train. The driver of the train will know when it is safe to proceed onto a stretch of single line as, instead of being handed a brass key, a microprocessor in his cab will illuminate an indicator on the loco control panel giving details of the line over which he is permitted to pass.

# Coding techniques

The signalbox microprocessor and the train borne microprocessor will be linked to each other by radio. The integrity of the message that passes by radio between Dingwall and the locomotive (as well as the assurance that the message goes only to the locomotive for which it is intended) is achieved by transmitting the locomotive address with associated information in the form of data telegram. Sophisticated coding techniques are applied to this telegram to ensure that any corruption of the original message causes the telegram to be rejected by the receiving microprocessor.

The signalman at Dingwall is provided with a microprocessor based interlocking and associated visual display monitor on which is given the current state of traffic on the line.

Dingwall, consequently, is the pioneer application of microprocessor based signalling on British Railways and a world pioneer of locomotive borne equipment for single line working.

The use of radio allows the elimination of the pole route that has carried communication between the Kyle line signalboxes for so many years. It also gives the locomotive driver speech communication with the signalman at any time in the course of his journey.

# Do-it-yourself

Another piece of ingenuity was required by the railway engineers for the operation of points at passing loops. If the signalman no longer existed who would operate the points?

The answer was that the train itself should do this operation, by making the switch blades trailable, i.e. the train would push the blades over as it leaves the passing loop whilst a pre-pressurised hydraulic ram would restore the blades behind the departed train, thus leaving the blades in the correct position for the next train coming off the single line into the loop.

The system will soon be in operation. Trail runs have started and show that it is a success. However, safety is a very important factor and in a remote line reliability of operation is also very important. Extensive testing of the equipment is essential to ensure that these requirements for safety and reliability can be met. This testing has started with Engineers from British Railways Research and Development at Derby and Engineers from the Signal & Telecommunications Department.

By September, trains will be running to Kyle under RETB conditions. The familiar sight of the timber signalbox with a house nearby for the signalman, the mechanical signal arms, the multiplicity of timber telegraph poles and, above all the signalman himself exchanging both the brass key token and a few words with the locomotive driver will have vanished from the scene. The trains, however, will still be there.

# LEVEL CROSSING

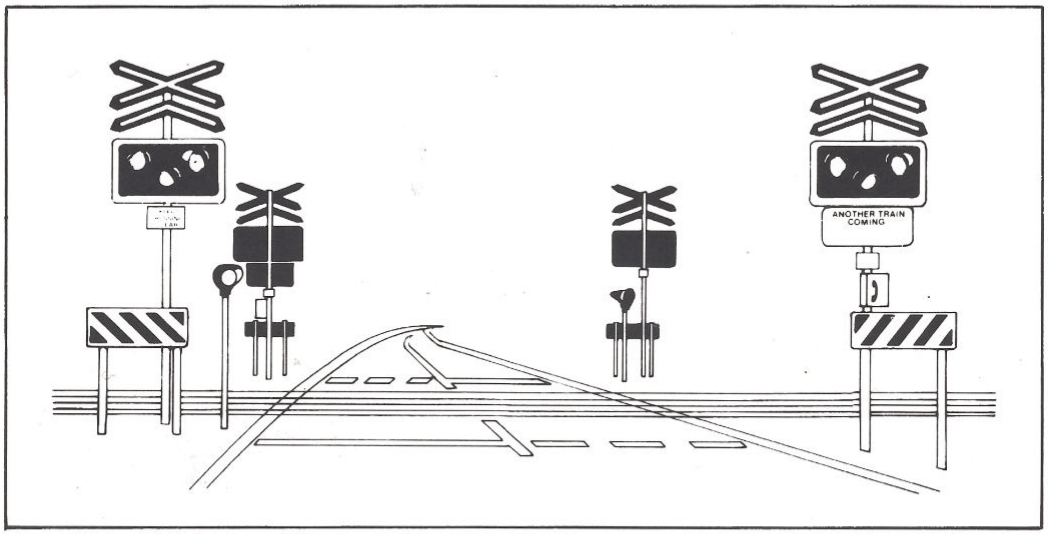
In addition to the visual changes on the lineside there will be changes significantly affecting road users.

The present system has seven manned level crossings where the railway line bisects the public roads. These will be replaced by automatic open crossings comprising the flashing lights in common use elsewhere in the BR network and on the continent. The first of these new crossings has been installed at Strathcarron and will be followed within a year by the remaining six.

The diagram shown below illustrates the new system.

All of these new systems — signalling and level crossings are the physical aspects of the new technology being harnassed to reduce the costs and improve the efficiency of this line.

With the assistance of the Highland Regional Council a programme of station improvements has been implemented.




# Scotrail

## RADIO ELECTRONIC TOKEN BLOCK

# Mystery

**Facebook is full** of fascinating organised groups, to which you have to apply for membership explaining your interest. The trouble with this of course is the danger of disappearing down rabbit holes and losing the occasional morning, afternoon or evening.

One such group which popped up on my FB feed is the Railway Identification Group. If you come across a railway photo and wonder where it was taken, or what the circumstances were, this is the group to ask.

Some algorithm spotted that I have an interest in railways, so one day I was presented with a post asking if anyone knew the location of an old photo of The Orcadian passing another train.

There were already three suggestions put forward - Fearn, Invergordon and Golspie. The picture is clearly looking generally southwards. So that immediately ruled out Invergordon which had a signalbox and goods shed which would be visible. The track at the southern end of Fearn Station is not on a bend. That left Golspie.

I got in touch with Mike Wedgewood, author of the *Modern Railways* publication *Highland Railways - Four decades of Diesel Traction North of Perth* to see if he had any thoughts. I'd noticed the photo of Golspie in his book and he agreed that it was probably there. He sent me a crop from his photo enlarging the area at the rear of the train which shows the track curving away to the right as it does in the old photo.


A quick look at the National Library of Scotland georeferenced maps confirmed that the track you can see on the left was there even on the OS 6" 1888-1915 map.

So, where *was* I...?


**Ian Budd**

www


# Rail Crucial to Unlocking UK's Economic Growth and Achieving Net Zero Ambitions, New Research Reveals

***Last autumn*** *saw the publication of a report which the Rail Delivery Group commissioned from WPI Economics, a research organisation which specialises in looking at major issues, such as productivity and growth and social inequality.*

*The report, which is available to read on our website, establishes something of which FoFNL is already well aware - the economic contribution which rail provision makes to the areas it serves and to the people who live and work there, as well as to the whole economy.*

*RDG issued this press release to draw attention to the report.*

Rail Delivery Group

National Rail

WWW

- Latest research reveals the value of the railways to the UK economy, the environment and society currently exceeds £26bn in benefits delivered each year
- Boosting rail use by 40% by 2035 could see this value increase to £46bn, supporting economic growth and the net zero transition
- Data shows that rail customers are essential to local communities contributing £98bn annually with their spend while travelling

New research from WPI Economics, commissioned by Rail Delivery Group, reveals the rail industry generated £26 billion in economic, environmental and social benefits to UK over the past year, with rail customers contributing £98 billion through spending within local communities.

With the rail network facilitating over three million journeys each day, its impact on the UK economy is significant, playing a key role in the productivity of our cities and towns. The industry also directly employs over 100,000 people across varying roles – from station staff and train drivers to underwater divers and seasons delivery managers.

## Unlocking future growth potential

Beyond its current contributions, the rail industry has significant potential for growth, further bolstering the UK economy. According to projections by the Railway Industry Association (RIA), rail travel is expected to grow by an average of 1.6% annually over the next three decades, driven by

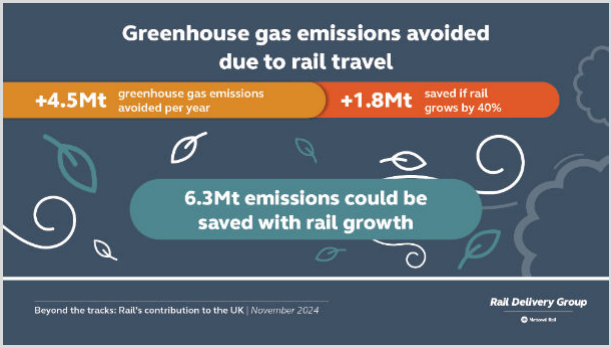
economic and population growth. This would be equivalent to a 20% increase in rail usage by 2035, potentially raising the industry's contribution from £26bn to £35bn.

If rail usage was to increase by 40%, driven by improved services and a growing preference for rail as a sustainable mode of transport, the total value of the rail industry could soar to £46bn, adding £20bn on top of the existing £26bn contribution. This would significantly benefit the economic, environmental and social landscape across the UK.


To make that possible and unlock the potential, it is important the rail industry continues to work together to bolster the attractiveness of rail to customers. Alongside future government investment in infrastructure, future growth also depends on action from the rail industry to improve day-to-day performance; to encourage modal shift through better integration with other modes of transport; make rail accessible to everyone; and continue to make improvements to the overall customer experience.

## Supporting the transition to net zero

For every mile a person travels, passenger trains produce only around a fifth of the greenhouse gas emissions from the average petrol car. This latest research finds that a 40% growth in rail use is needed by 2035 to shift a minimum of four billion miles from car to train, to achieve the country's net zero targets in line with the Committee on Climate Change (CCC)'s preferred pathway. A shift of this scale could result in a 1.8Mt decrease in greenhouse gas emissions per year – greater than all domestic aviation emissions in 2019.




## Enhancing social connectivity

The rail network also plays a vital role in connecting people and communities across the UK. It enables almost two-thirds (64%) of people aged 16-30 and 55% of people over 30 to travel more independently, providing crucial access to jobs, education, and leisure opportunities, particularly in rural areas. Continuing to make rail more accessible will help to reduce social exclusion, improve quality of life and could result in increased rail travel, which will further unlock the network's social value benefits.

> **Jacqueline Starr, CEO of Rail Delivery Group** said: "The UK's rail network does more than simply transport us from A to B; it plays a crucial role in driving economic growth by connecting businesses and communities, improving productivity, and supporting the transition to net zero.
>
> "The creation of Great British Railways is an opportunity for the rail industry to come together and make the improvements that are needed to attract more people to rail, unlocking even greater value for the economy, environment, and wider society.
>
> "Rail can and must be the backbone of the country's future growth and environmental ambitions."

# Timely Reminder to MSPs

**The Scottish Government has failed** so far to invest significantly in Highlands railways. Although both referring specifically to the Highland Main Line, these two old newspaper reports are a timely reminder of the Highlands Railway Deficit affecting all lines which converge on the Highland Capital.

*The Herald* 28-06-2006

The main line rail journey between Inverness and the Central Belt could become quicker and more competitive in comparison with road travel - and carry as many as 200,000 more passengers a year - for an investment of just £55m.

This is the conclusion of two reports published yesterday on improving rail services in the Highlands. They claim that significant service enhancements on all of the railway lines in the north could be made for a relatively modest investment.

The reports are designed to influence railway strategy in the north up to 2020. They say that, at a cost of £55m, journey times from Inverness to Glasgow and Edinburgh could be cut by 44 minutes to 2hrs 45mins with hourly services.

The key works required include returning the four-mile stretch between Culloden and Daviot to twin track; building a passing loop at Ballinluig, along with general improvements; and work to Kingswood Tunnel at Birnam Hill.

Taking an optimistic view, it is expected that in the first year around 138,000 passenger trips would result from the upgrade, rising to 200,000 by 2020. A good return on investment is expected, with every £1 generating a £2.61 benefit.

More significant infrastructural work in Fife region could further reduce journey times to Edinburgh to 2hrs 30mins and would also benefit services to Perth, Dundee, Aberdeen and the north-east. The reports - commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), HITRANS (the Highland transport agency) and the Highland Rail Partnership - also consider possibilities for increasing freight and charter operations from Dingwall to Kyle of Lochalsh along with provision of a commuter service at a cost of around £1.4m.

Ron McAulay, Director of Network Rail in Scotland said: "These reports will feed into the process of compiling a future strategy for Scotland's growing railway."

*Press & Journal* 17-08-2011

Scottish Government says service could be speeded up by next year.

Transport Minister Keith Brown said a project to reduce times through technical improvements to the railway track would be delivered in stages.

He was responding to a question from Highlands and Islands Labour MSP David Stewart who believes that faster rail times on the vital line were crucial to the Highland economy.

Mr Stewart had pressed the Scottish Government to state when the planned reduction of 35 minutes in the rail journey time between Inverness and Edinburgh. would come into effect, and sought a timescale for plan to cut journey times.

The transport minister said improvements would start being made this year, which would lead to reduction in times on some services from 2012.

Transport Scotland said increases in service frequency and line speed enhancements formed phase one of the project, and two additional services would be introduced on the Highland Main Line from December 2011.

Transport Scotland added that it was working closely with Network Rail to develop the next phase of improvements for the route, which may include additional infrastructure improvements, such as passing loops.

Mr Stewart said: "The minister has advised me that these speed improvements will take place between Stanley Junction and Blair Atholl, Inchlea and Newtonmore and Carrbridge and Inverness.

"I will look forward to these improvements, as it is imperative for the Highland economy that we have good business links and routes with the minimum of time spent travelling between the Highlands capital and the other major cities in Scotland if not the UK."

# Political Support

**In April I had a most useful** and enjoyable chat with one of our members. John Erskine has worked in the office of Rhoda Grant MSP, one of our vice presidents, for a number of years and we had been in contact in the past about parliamentary questions.

It turns out that John is an avid rail supporter and is now standing for selection as a Labour Party candidate in the 2026 Holyrood elections in either the Inverness and Nairn or the Caithness, Sutherland and Ross seat.

We spent a morning discussing over coffee what I refer to as the Highlands Railway Deficit. I outlined the many deficiencies which successive Scottish Governments (and the UK Government before 1999) have failed to tackle.

We discussed what it might take to generate the interest of MSPs in the Highlands railways. Inevitably the Central Belt receives the most attention; it's where the majority of the population live and the majority of MSPs represent. It doesn't need to be like that though. A government has obligations to distribute the facilities needed for everyone round the whole country. 'Remote' parts such as Caithness are often virtually ignored - victims of the business case mentality which is deployed to replace actual consideration. As a Wick resident said to me last year, "Remote? We're not remote, you are!"

Talking to John revealed his determination that the next Holyrood government will pay more attention to those parts outside the Central Belt. Referring to our campaign for the construction of the Delmore Loop, he said, "As a rail enthusiast, regular user of the Far North Line, and a member of the Friends of the Far North Line, I fully understand why this loop is the top infrastructure priority for campaigners across the region."

The *Inverness Courier* - a newspaper always supportive of our efforts to highlight the deficiencies of the Far North Line, and their remedies - carried a piece by Philip Murray about our meeting. The article quoted John:

"We cannot build a reliable and modern Highland rail service on outdated infrastructure that was never designed for today's needs. The Delmore Loop would address one of the most serious capacity issues on the network and help unlock the potential of rail across the north.

"Yes, this project comes at a significant cost - but it is an essential investment in regional transport and economic growth. It's time for the Highlands to get our fair share."

It was reassuring to discuss the Highlands railways with someone who shares our enthusiasm and determination to see things improve. If John is successful I'm sure his infectious positivity will convince MSPs of all parties that there really is a job waiting to be done, and that they are the ones to do it.

Just as we did in 2021, we will be getting in touch next year with all the parliamentary candidates. We will point out their obligation if elected, to ensure that rail in the Highlands is given what it needs to catch up with service provision enjoyed by residents in other parts of Scotland, and to play its part in modal shift from road to rail. Rail provision is not, and must never be, a *party* political issue, but it's definitely a *political* issue and the support of MSPs of all parties is key to a change from the recent virtual paralysis in Highlands railway investment.

The Far North Line, the Kyle Line, the Highland Main Line and the Inverness-Aberdeen line await!

**Ian Budd**

*This article in* The Herald *came just too late for our last issue.* ***Andy Maciver*** *was Head of Communications for the Scottish Conservatives. There are many things here with which it's hard to disagree. But as Highlands railway campaigners we might take some convincing that economic growth in the Central Belt is for the benefit of the country as a whole?*

*Given the lack of money for infrastructure, which seems to be permanent and makes campaigning for rail sometimes feel near-pointless (no pun intended), it is obvious that something needs to change. Devolution can feel like an uncomfortable halfway house. Westminster has been relieved of the obligation to fund infrastructure in Scotland but has not put in place a method by which Scotland can do it itself.*

## Why is Scotland always in the slow lane when it comes to our infrastructure?

*The Herald* - 10 January 2025

**As a party with no friends** in a proportionally representative Parliament, the Scottish Conservatives have never been particularly proximate to the levers of power during the 25 years of devolution. However, as the only party in the Parliament which could claim to be from the traditional centre-right, it has often generated good ideas, especially when it comes to growing Scotland's lame economy. This was particularly true in the era before 2011, when the constitutional debate encompassed everyone and everything.

I worked for the party in the early stages of devolution, and so it was with a wry smile that I read on the pages of *The Herald* on the first day of the year that in 2009 the Scottish Government had considered whether there should be an ultra-fast Maglev train running on stilts along the M8 between Edinburgh and Glasgow. Two years before that, in 2007, the very same idea had appeared in the Scottish Tory manifesto which I wrote, generated by the then deputy leader and economy lead for the party, Murdo Fraser.

The idea at the time was to in effect create a twin-city which would be in a better position to compete globally, attract investment and supercharge economic growth in the central belt, for the benefit of the country as a whole. It is not at all unlike the thesis promoted recently by Donald Anderson, former leader of Edinburgh Council, and his former Glasgow opposite number Steven Purcell.

Had it begun then, when the Scottish Government had discussed it, it would likely have been completed by now. Imagine the difference it might have made. Alas, though, the proposal never made it any further, having apparently been rejected immediately on the basis that there was no government budget from which the cost could have been met.

Sadly, this is a familiar tale in devolved Scotland. There is shared blame. It is a long time since the Scottish Government could credibly claim to have outlined a genuinely ambitious vision on transport infrastructure, certainly using the definition of ambition that similar countries like Ireland or the Scandinavians would use. Its latest strategic plan – STPR2 – was long on detail but short on high-level aspiration. Gone are the days of high-speed rail between Glasgow and Edinburgh, or indeed linking up the north, which is arguably even more significant given the gradual movement of Scotland's economy "up and out".

The focus on trunk roads remains the A9 – critically important, no doubt, but hardly the final piece of the puzzle.

However, I said "shared blame" earlier for a good reason. This new Scottish Government of John Swinney and Kate Forbes has put in place a sensible, foundational Budget, but there is no denying that their government does not control the levers it needs to deliver a truly ambitious, generationally transformational programme of infrastructure.

The primary issue is that major infrastructure build can no longer take place from within the public purse. The money the Scottish Government can find down the back of the sofa could not have paid for Maglev in 2009, and it also cannot pay for even one new road, tunnel, bridge or railway, let alone all of them. Instead, these must be paid for by private capital, and private capital must be borrowed. These peer countries borrow, build, and pay back through tolling. We can't, because borrowing powers (and for that matter powers over road and vehicle tax) are not remotely adequate.

It is frankly baffling that supporters of independence fail to deploy this argument more regularly. Travelling the 104 miles between the two great cities of Scotland's north – Aberdeen and Inverness – takes nearly three hours by car and not much less by train.

Only a few miles shorter as the crow flies, you can drive from Birmingham to Manchester in significantly less than two hours, or go by train in less than 90 minutes. The Aberdeen-inverness corridor is critical to our energy future, and it is unthinkable that it would be in the state it is in if it was closer to London.

This is a glaring opportunity for a struggling Scottish Labour as much as it is for the SNP. If Anas Sarwar and his team are not in a position to extract a pledge from Westminster to create the mechanism to revolutionise Scotland's infrastructure, then I'm not entirely sure who is.

This is, I am afraid, something of an indication of a lack of self-confidence in devolved Scotland. Devolution is 25 years old. We have spent the first half of it getting our feet under the desks, and the second half of it talking about whether or not we should be an independent country. Meanwhile, our competitors have their feet on the accelerator.

Most countries in the world could open a map and wish they were Scotland, geographically. Lots of land. Lots of water. Lots of wind. Potential; but not yet reality.

Infrastructure is political gold. Building it creates growth. Delivering it creates jobs. Using it creates voters. And with only a little over a year to go before the Holyrood elections, there is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for the party, and for the leader, who offers the people of Scotland something bigger and better and brighter than they have been offered before.

There are plenty of other countries who seem pretty good at it. Why not us?

**Photo: Sandy Colley**

# Railways Need an Overhaul

**Jonathan Pugh** - *The Herald* - 01 Feb 2025

**For a passenger**, what they need from the railway is simple. They buy a ticket, which should allow them to reach their destination safely, comfortably and punctually.

ScotRail's passengers are generally reasonably satisfied with their journeys – 88% of them according to the latest Transport Focus Rail User Survey. It should be a routine experience, unremarkable, trustworthy and predictable.

Despite this, railways remain a constant source of political interest and debate. It is a high-profile part of the transport portfolio, funding of which was devolved to Holyrood in 2006.

Last year expenditure on the network was £1.17 billion. This is a significant commitment that affects everyone, even if they do not use trains.

Much of the political focus is on the merits of privatisation or nationalisation rather than what people want from the railways and how best to provide it.

Selling the railway in the 1990s was meant to unleash a new energy into the system. The Major government's approach split the tracks from the trains, so ScotRail no longer controlled the infrastructure on which its trains ran. It no longer owned the trains themselves. Train services were contracted through franchises, with minimum timetables being specified in return for subsidy.

Between the 1990s and the pandemic, passenger numbers in Scotland grew by two-thirds. Advocates of the private sector have made bold claims that this was enabled by reducing state control, although the franchise contracts were much more detailed and controlling than the rules under which British Rail operated.

The ongoing recovery after the Covid restrictions has been dented by industrial relations issues, and changes to travel patterns driven by flexible working.

The passenger should not need to know what is going on behind the scenes, but it is a matter for public interest given the expenditure involved. Industry professionals find themselves describing a complicated industry, with numerous organisations involved in funding and managing the network.

Explaining how Transport Scotland, Scottish Rail Holdings and other bodies interact with those operating the day-to-day railway is not simple, let alone the functions of the Office of Rail and Road or Network Rail. Privatisation replaced a relatively simple "vertically-integrated" railway with a complex environment of contracts and regulation.

The infrastructure was renationalised in 2002, and the ScotRail and Sleeper contracts returned to the public sector in 2022 and 2023, ending the privatisation process. Yet the complex structures and rules remain in place. Decision-making has become very slow, given the number of bodies involved and what has been perceived as reluctance to make any choices in case they turn out to be wrong.

Partly, this is driven by many of the people involved, including ministers, not expecting to be in the same positions when the change are made. Choices about future rolling stock, services and fares seem to be slow and opaque. Any potentially controversial decision is inevitably protracted with politicians and advisers seeking to avoid bad news.

Yet even though Scotland funds its own railway, there are still significant links to the British network. Cross-border passenger and freight services are, and will remain, important in Scotland. Any future changes need to reflect their importance in driving economic growth, sustainability and social cohesion.

Change is on the way – the UK government has set out its plans for a single body, Great British Railways (GBR), that will manage both track and train. For the user, the future could be much better. For the professionals running the service, radical change could let them manage, release frustrations, as well as reduce costs. It is not a matter of who owns the railway but getting the professionals, officials and politicians working together to play to their respective strengths. A reliable, efficient railway should be within reach.

# Letters to the Press

*An important part of campaigning is the writing of letters to the press.* The Herald *ran a series of rail articles in February, the one on the facing page, by Jonathan Pugh, is mentioned below.*

**Thank you** for your timely and wide ranging week of articles about the state of the railways in Scotland.

It is evident that provision varies widely across the nation with some places served in a better manner than others. Relevant geographical factors include terrain and accessibility, population density and locations of industry and commerce.

Although a lot of good work has been done electrifying most lines in the central belt and the two main arteries to England, much remains to be done to electrify and speed up the main lines north to Aberdeen and Inverness through the strategic cities of Dundee and Perth.

Inverness is further disadvantaged by being the only Scottish city substantially and critically hobbled by the blight of long sections of single track line. It is very difficult to schedule any additional freight or passenger trains north of Perth or Aberdeen until extra line capacity is provided. Average journey speeds barely reach 50mph! Developments such as the new Inverness and Cromarty Firth Freeport will be held back.

I was one of more than a hundred people who heard the First Minister after the Cabinet Meeting in Inverness on 5 August 2008 promise to provide hourly train services to Edinburgh and Glasgow taking 3 hours and to Aberdeen in 2 hours.

A start was made with the excellent redoubling of the line from Aberdeen to Inverurie, and the introduction in 2000 of a "Business train" to Edinburgh taking 3 hrs 10 mins southbound and five minutes longer northbound.

Recently the Inverness Chamber of Commerce has been rightly complaining that these trains are now taking 26 and 40minutes longer respectively. The whole service has worsened, often with long waiting times in Perth station.

Jonathan Pugh (*Herald* 1 February) has clearly outlined the seeming paralysis in some decision making on the railways, which, with Government financial reluctance to allocate capital to improve line capacity, is letting down the Highland economy.

I understand that money is short, but often it is not ScotRail to blame when trains are late. It is the Scottish Government.

**Richard Ardern**

**The Friends of the Far North Line** heartily endorses the comments in Kevin McKenna's article "Scotland's two-tier railway system and why the Central Belt wouldn't put up with it" (*Herald* 5 February).

Public services, such as railways, are provided for the use, and benefit, of everyone and should not be subjected to the 'business case mentality' which looks to see how many people live in a particular area and evaluates their costs/worth in £s per person. This is not how a country works. The sooner we can escape from these shackles the better.

We have been campaigning for twenty years for a very small piece of infrastructure just west of Inverness which would transform the reliability and capacity of services on the Far North Line by allowing trains going in opposite directions to pass each other. This ability is a given on roads - even single track roads have many passing places. Single track railways have very few, and Inverness, shockingly, is served only by single track railways.

We've been told there is no money available even for a tiny project like this.

To achieve the transfer of as much traffic as possible from road to rail this 'Highlands Railway Deficit' must be addressed urgently by the Scottish Government.

WWW

**Ian Budd**

**In February the Department for Transport (DfT) published** a consultation document, "A railway fit for Britain's future" ready for the putting forward of a Railways Bill. The document is available to read on our website [www.fofnl.org.uk/archives/docs/a-railway-fit-for-britains-future.pdf].

It outlines the UK Government's thoughts on the setting up and running of Great British Railways. This will see the fully nationalised train operation and the current government-owned Network Rail being brought into one organisation. The document's introduction, by Heidi Alexander MP rather optimistically describes this as "consolidating functions currently spread across Network Rail, the Department for Transport, and 14 separate rail operators into a single organisation with a single, cohesive strategy". Optimistically, because in reality the railways in Scotland and Wales are devolved. The plans acknowledge this, and suggest ways to make it function as intended. Scotland is already running its railway more or less according to this model, even though Network Rail Scotland is not fully under Scottish Government control.

Clearly the new arrangements must be right for Scotland, and it is important for us that we lose none of the current advantages which have flowed from the close working relationship of ScotRail and Network Rail in the Alliance (Scotland's Railway), which has been working since long before ScotRail was nationalised.

In the 50-page document the section headed "Scotland" lays out the way the relationship is seen. There is an interesting phrase, "jointly owned by the two governments", which is not explained further.

## Scotland

6.10 The Scottish Government is the commissioning body for ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper services. It also funds rail infrastructure in Scotland and will continue to do so. Scottish ministers will therefore continue to have a separate High-Level Output Specification (HLOS) and Statement of Funds Available (SoFA), as outlined in Chapter 4. The government will engage the Scottish Government on ensuring the relationship it has with Network Rail is transferred to GBR, once established, and delivering Scottish infrastructure on behalf of Scottish ministers.

6.11 The government will work with the Scottish Government to put in place strong joint working arrangements between GBR and ScotRail, building on the existing alliance between Network Rail and ScotRail that has delivered improved performance and cost savings.

6.12 The government intends to legislate in a way that enables the relationship between GBR and ScotRail (and between UK and Scottish ministers) to evolve. We have recently passed the Public Ownership Act, which requires Scottish ministers to secure passenger services from public sector bodies owned by themselves (such as Scottish Rail Holdings), the Secretary of State for Transport (such as GBR) or jointly owned by the two governments. Where relevant railways legislation will need to be further amended to establish GBR, we will preserve the effect of these provisions. This would enable a successor to the existing alliance between Network Rail and ScotRail to be established between GBR and ScotRail, while preserving options for UK and Scottish ministers to agree deeper integration of track and train.

6.13 The government will continue to engage with the Scottish Government on future arrangements set out in this consultation to ensure that Scotland benefits from rail sector transformation and the establishment of GBR.

A link to a document containing all references to Scotland in the consultation can be found on the companion web page for this issue of FNE, along with a link to the consultation document.

www

# Transform Scotland's Response

## 1. Introduction.

We are Scotland's alliance for sustainable transport. Our diverse membership brings together over 70 public, private and third sector organisations from across Scotland. Our response principally focuses on the railway in Scotland and Anglo-Scottish routes. However, given the GB-wide nature of the consultation and the likely financial impacts on Scotland, we also make some general comments.

## 2. General Comments.

### Coordinated approach

The aim to bring track and train together is to be welcomed as this should aid planning, both short and long term, increase efficiency of operations, and reduce overall costs. The cost base of the railway has steadily increased in a variety of areas, but in particular the cost of new infrastructure. There is a pressing need to tackle this cost escalation so that further enhancements to the network are deemed affordable.

### Safety regulations

Another area driving cost increases is the over-zealous regulation of the railway and its operations in terms of safety. This increases the cost to passengers and makes the railway less appealing resulting in transfer to other modes, particularly the private car which is a mode of transport many times more dangerous than the railway. A more holistic view is needed here where safety across all modes is considered rather than looking at the railway in isolation. While this example lies outside Scotland we would highlight the presumption by regulators against the extension of third rail electrification. This has led to significant increases in operational costs, a less efficient railway, and a failure to decarbonise.

### Long-term planning

The consultation document fails to set out a clear vision for the railway or a real sense of direction. A longterm strategic plan is required which outlines how the railway will grow and contribute to government targets to drive economic growth, regenerate towns and cities, aid social inclusion and help to tackle climate change. Crucially there is a need to ensure that business plans include the need to grow revenue not simply to cut costs and timescales, and targets for this and modal shift to rail should form part of business plans. Clearly governments have a key role to play here in their wider policy decisions on transport economics and land use planning and we return to this subject in the later section on 'Freight services and The Impact on Scotland'.

Five year funding cycles for operation, maintenance and renewal are to be welcomed but this needs to extend to the whole railway as a key element of a long-term strategic plan. The rail supply industry must have confidence in long-term plans on matters such as electrification and rolling stock replacement to allow them to make their own plans; this will reduce costs and increase efficiency. We must never see a return to the 'hand to mouth existence' typified by annual settlements, while suffering from the short-term whims of government ministers. These conditions only serve to undermine trust in the UK and to increase costs: it is only to be expected if suppliers decide to focus on overseas markets if they deem the UK to lack long-term plans, and is seen to be unreliable with regard to whatever plans may have in place at any given time.

## 3. The Impact on Scotland.

### Economic benefits of rail

The devolved nature of the railway in Scotland has helped to create a more joined-up approach and a better understanding of the wider value of the railway to Scotland as a whole. Numerous studies have demonstrated the wider value that Britain's railway brings to society, and it is unreasonable to categorise the cost of the railway as merely a balance between money raised from fares and taxpayers. This ignores the significant role the railway brings to the economy and society. The 'ScotRail Economic Impact Report 2024', published on 31 March,

outlines the railway's contribution to supporting jobs, driving regional growth and making Scotland's society and economy greener. The annual social and economic contribution is shown to be more than £4bn.

### Devolved powers

What is notable in Scotland is the number of railway and station re-openings and progress with electrification since the devolution of rail powers, benefiting local communities and reducing Scotland's reliance on fossil fuels. It is essential that these devolved powers are maintained and enhanced. Great British Railways will inherit Network Rail's infrastructure remit and there is a need for this area of the railway to be fully devolved for the railway operating wholly within Scotland. That will allow a single directing mind to have overall control of track and train within Scotland.

### Cross-border rail

For Anglo-Scottish services there will be a need for close co-operation with the Scottish Government to ensure that the correct balance is struck between long distance and local commuter services within Scotland. The new ECML timetable highlights the earlier failure of a joined-up approach to the development of the railway. Infrastructure enhancements were planned and not fully implemented and not coordinated with the railway timetable and new rolling stock. More and improved Edinburgh to London services are to be welcomed and are a key towards modal shift from air to rail but local commuter services to Edinburgh have been compromised at a time of large population growth in the East Lothian catchment.

## 4. Freight Services.

Governments north and south of the border have ambitions and targets for the growth of rail freight. This is to be welcomed and it is essential that the new railway creates capacity for this growth. However, as with passenger services, the affordability and convenience of rail sits within the broader context of overall government policy on transport. For freight, there are well-known schemes for infill electrification which would allow electric traction to become the dominant mode for many freight flows. This would increase efficiency and reduce cost for the operators and crucially increase the capacity of the network as a whole as freight could more easily mix with passenger flows. This is a 'win win' for the network across the UK and should be actioned as a priority.

Equally government policy on fuel duty plays a key role in the choice of mode for both passenger and freight services. For freight, access charges have increased by 105% for bulk and over 80% for intermodal since 2010 while fuel duty on road transport has been frozen since 2010 and further reduced since 2022. Electricity costs for freight operators are another key element in the attractiveness and affordability of electric traction. Here we've had the bizarre consequence of operators reverting to diesel traction on electrified sections of railway which runs counter to any decarbonisation aims and eats into valuable capacity on the network.

## 5. Passenger Standards Authority.

A strong voice for passengers is to be welcomed. However, many journeys are multi-modal so a focus on the end-to-end journey will be important at all times but crucially at times of disruption. It is not clear if the Passenger Standards Authority's powers will extend to Scotland, and clarification is required on the role of the PSA in Scotland or whether an equivalent alternative for Scotland is being proposed.

## 6. Open Access Operators.

There is clearly a role for Open Access operators who have in the past created rail services to towns and cities previously underserved and helped to grow rail's modal share. While in Scotland this is confined to Anglo-Scottish routes there are notable examples in England where established operators either by their own choice or under the influence of the DfT have failed to fully develop the market or in some cases have withdrawn services. Hull Trains stands out as a good example of the need for, and success of, an Open Access operation.

However, there is a clear need to balance all passenger and freight services with the capacity available on the network to ensure that reliable services can be delivered. That capacity should not be fixed for the longterm and strategies should be put in place to increase capacity to run more passenger services of all types as well

as develop the freight market.

## 7. Conclusions.

The overall aims for the establishment of Great British Railways are to be welcomed. There will clearly be many overlaps with devolved governments and regional authorities and a key element of the success of the new railway will be the careful and productive management of these relationships.

The planning, development and operation of the railway all require long-term and consistent strategies. For it to be a success and play a key role in economic, social and environmental policies this has to sit within the appropriate broader government policies on transport and land use planning. Recent evidence here suggests that there is a need for a fundamental reform in the approach of governments north and south of the border if we are to develop a more efficient and sustainable transport network.

We must move away from the simplistic approach that considers the cost of the railway as merely a balance between money raised from passengers and taxpayers to a wider understanding of the value delivered to society as a whole.

# A Tale of Two ScotRails

*March is traditionally railway conference month in Scotland, with major events held by* Modern Railways *magazine and Peloton.*

The Scotsman's *transport correspondent,* ***Alastair Dalton*** *penned these thoughts in the paper on 13 March..*

**Are you a ScotRail passenger** lucky enough to travel in its newest, bright, quiet and spacious trains – complete with full tables if you need to work? Or are you less fortunate, having to put up with the operator's much older, noisier and more cramped carriages, some with only smaller or no tables on offer?

It's becoming a tale of two ScotRails – and runs the risk of developing parallels with the state of ferries at fellow Scottish Government-run operator CalMac.

Joanne Maguire, ScotRail's managing director, pointedly underlined at a rail conference in January organised by *Modern Railways* magazine the nationalised operator had one of Britain's oldest fleets. That prompted others in the room to spell out the impact it was having, such as unreliable trains breaking down in the Highlands, where services are pretty sparse anyway.

Nothing happens quickly on the railways, and that seems to particularly be the case when it comes to ordering new trains.

There was little sign of progress at another rail conference last week, organised by event firm Peloton, three years on from new electric, battery and hydrogen trains being the talk of the steamie at the same event.

Expectations had been raised by ministers announcing they planned to order three new fleets to meet their ambitious target of scrapping ScotRail's diesel trains by 2035. The date has now been put back a decade to 2045, with details of how it will be achieved still to be announced, while the procurement process for only one of the fleets has started.

That is to replace secondhand inter-city trains around 45 years old, which may involve more hand-me-downs rather than a brand new green fleet.

Transport Secretary Fiona Hyslop told the conference her officials were "working hard to develop plans for replacement of ScotRail's suburban fleet".

However, Transport Scotland rail director Bill Reeve had earlier pointed out that diesel trains "will continue to be necessarily a part of our railway for some years yet" – albeit to help take traffic off the roads, since they have lower emissions than cars and lorries.

ScotRail's less fortunate passengers deserve to know how long until they, too, can enjoy the best it has to offer.

# BWC 3 - The Far North

The Branchline Society

www


**Photo: Kyle Tricker**

**On Friday 21 March I set off at 06:30** to catch a train to Wick. I usually get on at my local station, Bishopbriggs, if I'm heading north. This day was different - heading to Bo'ness with four supermarket 'bags for life' containing 174 copies of *FNE 94*, 296 copies of Richard Ardern's *Window Gazer* leaflet and 30 copies of *Highland Survivor* by David Spaven. I'm afraid this required the use of a car - I'd have needed an assistant and an overnight stay to get to Bo'ness for 07:30 by public transport with all that stuff!

Last October Kev Adlam, Fixtures Secretary of the Branch Line Society, got in touch with us to let us know about the tour and to see whether we would like to advertise in the tour booklet - for which there was no charge. He also offered us the chance to put FoFNL members on the train to bring FoFNL to the attention of the passengers.

This was a golden opportunity for us, so we accepted instantly. Kev agreed that we could distribute free copies of our magazine and *Window Gazer* leaflets, and he was happy for us to sell David's books too.

I was unable to do the whole tour so Kev offered me the chance to travel from Bo'ness to Inverkeithing, one of the pickup stations. Meanwhile, Neil our secretary had kindly offered to be on the FNL leg from Dingwall northwards.

In his initial contact Kev had also asked whether we could help find a piper to welcome the train to Wick. I wondered whether my friend Stuart Gray, who also happens to be a volunteer at Bo'ness, might be able to help. This was a lucky thought because Stuart was able to link Kev to a bagpiper in Wick who would be 13 by the time of the tour, so on 22 March Will Fryer piped the train in and Eilidh Budge (12) gave a Highland dancing performance on the platform too.

Word about the tour's visit to the Far North Line soon got out and social media was buzzing on 22 March. The John O'Groat Journal came up trumps with two excellent articles by David Scott before and after the tour.

Becoming involved with a rail tour, very much on the periphery, was an eye-opener. When my copies of the itinerary documents arrived I began to realise how much work is involved in putting a tour like

this together.

I had heard of the Branch Line Society, probably through photo captions in magazines, but I hadn't understood its purpose. On the BLS website it simply says, "It was established in 1955 and is widely recognised as Britain's leading amateur group for the study of railway infrastructure and history of networks", it goes on to explain, "Our emphasis is on the physical works and on operating arrangements, rather than motive power and rolling stock".

Kev sent me a copy of Network Rail's tour schedule and it was immediately obvious that one of the attractions for BLS members is to travel on track not usually used by passenger trains where possible. I didn't think I was interested in that side of things until, having been invited to join the train as it set off from Bo'ness and to stay on until Inverkeithing, I realised that that meant I would get to travel on the (normally closed-off with a gate) link from Manual on the Bo'ness & Kinneil Railway to the E&G, and also to turn left at Winchburgh Junction and head directly to the Forth Bridge, which no passenger trains currently use - cool - as my grandchildren would say!

I was allocated a space in the 'Volunteers' Coach' and that's when I began to realise just how many people it takes to make sure a tour like this runs perfectly. On board were BLS staff who were stewarding, SRPS members whose rolling stock was being used and who looked after the catering and GBRf staff who were manning the controls and in charge of the safety aspects. I think over 30 people in total. The banter level was extremely high!

Alighting at Inverkeithing reminded me of a quirky connection I have with the station - the main building, which opened in 1986, was designed by the architect we used for our house extension the previous year!


One of the things which impressed me most was the amount of information about the train's route which was contained in the booklet every traveller received. Inserted in this were track diagrams of everywhere the train was going to go - absolutely fascinating. I was happy too that our advert was given the whole back cover!

Anyone who has this kind of interest in railways should consider joining the Branch Line Society - it would be £12.00 p.a. very well spent.

Not only did the BLS organise a whip-round on the train for the piper and dancer, who each received a substantial 'thank you', but FoFNL received a very generous donation too.

Beside being an adventure for railway aficionados the tour itself was raising money for two charities - Great Ormond Street Hospital and the Martin House Children's Hospice. An astonishing £25,000 was the final figure.

I'll never look at rail tours in the same way again. Every time I see one I'll be thinking of the massive amount of work which goes into every aspect of the planning and operation with great respect.

Whilst compiling this article I became intrigued by the tour's official title - *BWC 3*. After a considerable amount of time down an internet search rabbit hole I gave up and emailed Kev. "*It stands for* ***Because We Can***." I think that sums it all up!

# The Tour

Photo: Ian Budd

**Day 1** The Wick-bound train's epic journey began at Bo'ness Station and headed up the hill to the other end of the B&KR at Manuel with a Class 37 locomotive at each end - handy for the amount of reversing the train was destined to do. 37403 *Isle of Mull* led, with 37401 *Mary Queen of Scots* at the other end.


That's how many people you need to run a rail tour!

Photo: David Scott, HNM

After joining the main Edinburgh & Glasgow line and picking up at Linlithgow the train took a left at Winchburgh Junction and headed over the Forth Bridge to another pick-up at Inverkeithing.

From there the train ran round the western side of the Fife Circle, passed through Dunfermline and at Thornton Junction took the newly opened route to Leven making the first visit of a tour train since the line

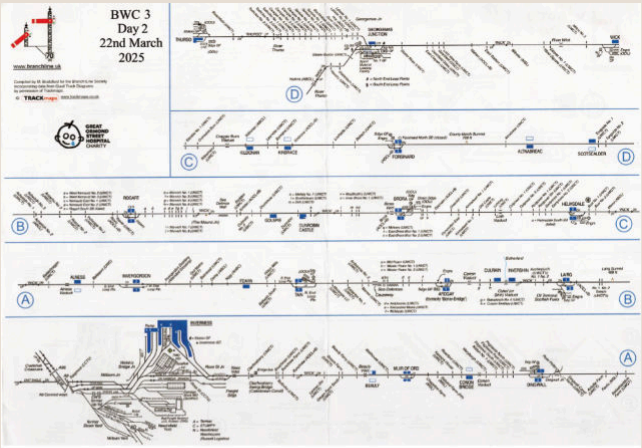
About to head for the E&G at Manuel

Photo: Ian Budd

reopened last June.

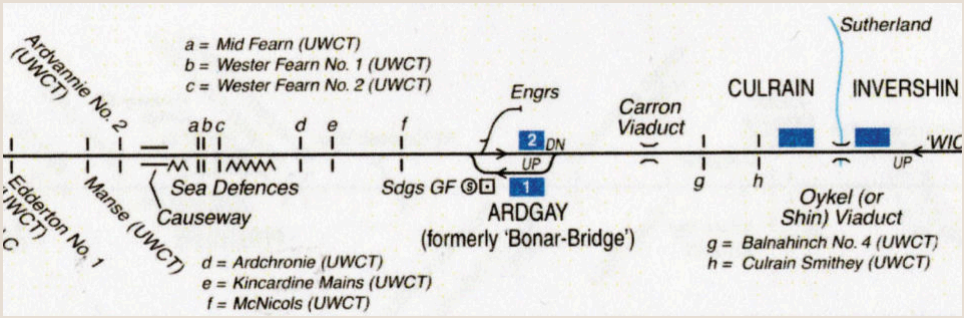
After two reversals the train travelled to Perth, via the direct line from Ladybank through Newburgh. The tour's next diversion was at Aviemore, where it travelled the length of the Strathspey Railway before heading to Inverness.

**Day 2** saw the train head for Wick, with a side trip up the line to Thurso. On its return to Inverness it traversed the Rose Street Curve and then reversed into the South platforms ready for its trip back to Bo'ness the next day.




One of four track diagram sheets provided to passengers
(with permission of TRACKmaps - https://trackmaps.co.uk)

**An example of the level of detail provided**




**Day 3** returning to Bo'ness via Aberdeen, Kirkcaldy and the Forth Bridge the train passed Bo'ness Junction and continued almost to Falkirk Grahamston, where it reversed at Grangemouth Junction to gain the up Edinburgh line in order to be able to reverse to Manuel and the B&KR at Bo'ness Junction. Arrival there was at the exact minute of Network Rail's published timetable for the tour - a tribute to both the planners and the operators.

**Ian Budd**

**Photo: Kyle Tricker**

# Altnabreac Lament

Photo: Colin Baird

*Altnabreac Station has been on all our minds for the last couple of years as the saga of the station house residents refusing access to staff from Network Rail, ScotRail and mobile phone provider EE, has unfolded. Criminal charges have been brought and civil land disputes are continuing.*

*Happily, the station reopened on 6 April with no fanfare - perhaps for fear of tempting fate. Sadly, the expensive equipment for the Request to Stop system is still languishing in the railway yard at Inverness.*

*Ignoring all this, the* John O'Groat Journal *carried this thought-provoking piece by* "Out and About With Ralph" *columnist* ***Ben MacGregor****.*

## No happy ending in store for desolate Altnabreac

**Once upon a time**, there was a train station, probably the remotest in Britain, in the heart of the vast moors of the Caithness Flow Country. It was called Altnabreac.

Nearly 50 years ago I cycled out there, a long ride on rough estate tracks, then wheeled the bike for miles over the wet moorland past the Caol Loch to pick up another estate track at Loch Caluim.

A few years later the world changed and landowners could plant trees instead of paying tax, suddenly huge areas of peat were ploughed up to be converted into slow-growing forests of mixed lodgepole pine and sitka spruce.

The idea was that the pines would dry up the peat with their long tap roots, allowing the much more valuable spruce to grow strongly, eventually overshadowing the pines which would die.

The rate of growth in these northern climes was, though, so slow that no profit could ever be turned and huge amounts of taxpayers' money was wasted on many square miles of folly and many miles of new forest road.

Now we know that peatland is a vast carbon store and this planting was about the worst thing you could do, releasing huge amounts of $CO_2$ as the peat dried and degraded. But new owners came, buying the forests for a song and it was just about worthwhile to harvest the timber for pulp and biomass fuel.

I cycled out to Altnabreac again recently, taking a new forest road which loops for miles from near Dirlot out towards Braehour then cuts back past Loch Meadie to rejoin the Altnabreac road. Now the trees have largely been removed you can see the sheer scale of landscape engineering that was undertaken – we were playing God with the land.

Beyond Loch More the track forks, one branch heading for Dalnawhillan and Glutt, the other taking a more direct route to Altnabreac. There are locked gates here, designed so you can easily get a bike or a horse across. At least 14 notices adorn the start of the Altnabreac route, surely a record, yet none warn of the real problems.

As you cycle on, mile after mile through the vast felled or remaining forests, you can but marvel at humanity's stupidity. Which peaks at Loch Caise.

Thirty years ago, public money created a set of walking routes here, you were encouraged to drive out, park and walk. It lasted but two years, the notice and map of the walks, bizarrely, remains, the walks have long vanished into the bog. Someone, maybe a new owner, banned cars and visitors from using this only road to the station and getting to the start of the walks.

The owners of the house at Altnabreac have made the station access their private garden, so there is now no way of getting to the trains, which therefore no longer stop. Will the station ever open again? I hope so, I want to take a kayak down the Sleachd before the next stage of destruction of this area…

Southwards, as the sun came out, I pedalled swiftly past Lochdhu Lodge to stop for a break by the fine Loch a Mhuilinn, outside the forests and still a typical peaceful Flow Country loch. Whooper swans swam, larks sung.

The former huge lodge at Dalnawhillan continues its slow decay. The barking dogs by the keeper's house still alert everyone for miles as you pass. The estate track is well maintained, indeed better than some public roads, and it was an enjoyable ride back to Loch More, out under the big sky above the River Thurso, giving a false illusion that nothing has changed here and nothing will.

The worst potholes on the Loch More road have, amazingly, been fixed and it was a smooth and sunny ride back home.

Alas, those forests. They have sealed the fate of the whole area. When the true value of the Flow Country was belatedly realised and it was declared a Unesco protected site, the degraded forest land was excluded.

One might have hoped that the forest would be restored as peatland, as has been done around Forsinard. No, there is far, far more money to be made. Turn this whole area into a huge wind farm of 600-foot high turbines garnished with industrial battery storage plants.

Just a bit of cut-and-pasting from other applications or even use ChatGBT to make the case that every potential damage can be mitigated. Then let the millions roll in!

Soon the train will trundle for miles past an industrial desolation. Nobody will want to get off at Altnabreac anyway. Our world-unique Unesco landscape degraded and diminished by towering turbines almost before the ink on the documents is dry. Once upon a time… it will not end happily ever after.

*The station in 2015. Photo: Colin Baird*

www

# Night Work


Summer's the ideal season for large scale engineering work. The weather's more likely to be friendly, the ground more stable and the hours of daylight long.

These photos were taken at Forsinard on Midsummer Night 2018 by **Jordan Kearney**, the driver of the train.