

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



Issue 96
September 2025



THE MAGAZINE OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

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Front cover: 158725 seen at Dalchalm, just north of Brora on 8 June 2025, working the 17:54 Inverness - Wick, the last Sunday service before the three-week engineering blockade. This is the first unit equipped for the satellite broadband trial. Photo: **Kyle Tricker**

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

I'm writing this sitting in comfort on an *InterCity* train heading to Inverness on my way to Wick for our AGM at the beginning of July.

Three weeks ago I made the same journey by car to visit the track renewal works at Brora. I need to confess that although I'm a rail campaigner I also really enjoy driving, but as I sit here in MkIII comfort, listening to BBC Sounds (with ear buds!) gazing at the wonderful, ever-changing view from the train, the contrast is striking. I'm going to arrive in Wick after a long, but enjoyable day.

Unlike some people in the media who have said that they're scared to drive on the A9 because it's so dangerous, I don't see a problem with the road itself - there can be dangerous drivers on any road. However, when you drive you are constantly engaged with watching your speed and looking out for all the vehicles in front and behind. The one thing you have no chance of doing is relaxing and enjoying the scenery.

All this is totally obvious of course, but still worth celebrating. For a long journey, rail is the way to travel. Staring at the vehicle in front and white lines on tarmac just cannot compete.

The trouble is of course that once you own a car you are committed to its expense, which might influence your choice.

If modal shift is to be achieved the government must act. It's a sobering thought that the last major investment in the Highland Main Line took place around 50 years ago - and that was just the replacing of 30 miles of double track that had been removed a while before. The Far North Line hasn't received significant infrastructure investment for 112 years when just six miles of double track was installed by the Highland Railway, which, being a limited

company, simply didn't have the money to do what it would have wished.

In the UK we are now returning to the rather obvious concept that railways are an essential shared facility, best paid for out of taxation, just like roads. The problem for railways in the Highlands is to get politicians to remember this - and to explain to accountants that you can't simply divide the cost of something by the number of people who use it to ascertain whether it would be money well-spent.

Of course a judgment is to be made - no-one would suggest that a half-hourly 100 mph train service between Thurso and Wick should be provided, just because Glasgow and Edinburgh have this. All that's required is common sense, along with a feeling of obligation to provide an appropriate service, no matter where in Scotland people live.

To be fair to Transport Scotland, which is charged with allocating limited funds to rail investment, it does assess proposals with more subtlety than simply cost divided by population, but then gets itself in a mess trying to quantify in advance the monetary value of a project. Benefit/cost projections for railway projects, such as rebuilding a section of the Waverley Route are now legendary in their failure.

Perhaps rail project plans just need to "game" the BCR process more successfully by inventing spurious equivalents to the monetary value of "driver frustration" used to justify the unnecessary dualling of the A9 (yes, as a driver of course I prefer dual-carriageway, but that's just selfish). "Passenger frustration" anyone? Or even "campaigner frustration" - that must be worth something!

Ian Budd

HOLYROOD CROSS PARTY GROUP ON SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT

FoFNL belongs to this group and will be attending the first meeting in the new session on 1 October.

The topic for 25-6 is Sustainable Freight. The FNL is a missed opportunity so far for this - let's hope the CPG influences enough MSPs to put their thinking caps on to address the question of what's needed to get freight back on our railway.

AGM & CONFERENCE 2025

WWW

Our 2025 AGM & Conference took place on Friday 4 July in The Norseman Hotel in Wick. The date was not as originally planned because of the very welcome major work being done on the FNL in June.

With Network Rail having such a high profile on the FNL because of the blockade it was perhaps appropriate that two of our three speakers were from NR. We had the amusing, and honestly unintentional, occurrence of all the speakers sharing the surname Ross!

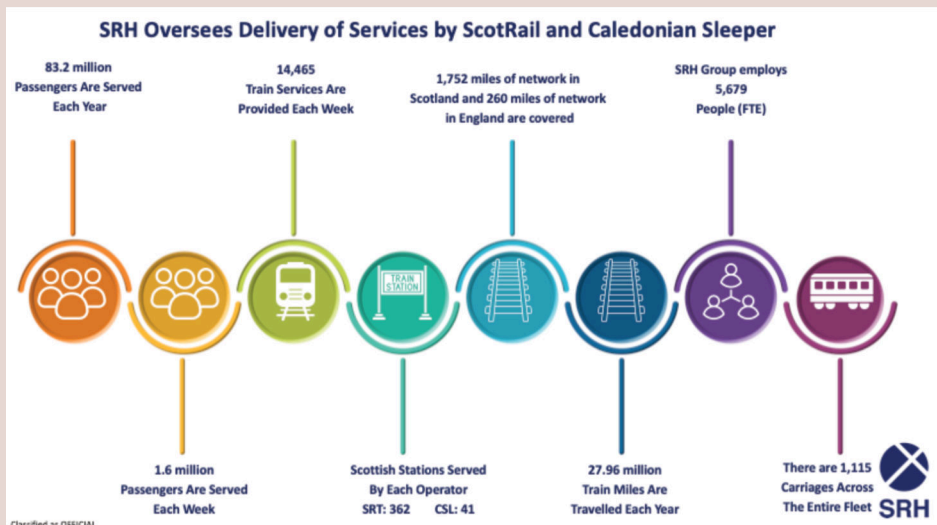
FoFNL policy is to hold the event in a different place each year, and the further north we go, the more concerning it is that fewer people will get there. We needn't have worried as there was only one fewer attendee than in Inverness last year.

It's easy just to accept how slow the rail journeys in the Highlands are, but a visit to Wick is a great reminder that in the time it would take a Wick resident to travel by train to Glasgow, a London resident could get there *and* back.

We were well looked-after by the hotel, and the usual IT difficulties were overcome (with help from Hannah Ross's son at one point). Your convener has noted that a sound amplification system really is a necessity on these occasions, and will take the required steps in the future.

Because the event was matched to the train times we couldn't begin the AGM until 12:00, so the conference began after lunch.

We were treated to three very interesting talks. Hannah Ross, CEO of Scottish Rail Holdings, opened with a detailed account of SRH's role in the Scottish railway industry. It was a day for statistics, and Hannah presented this slide, which shows what a large operation SRH oversees.



As your resident pedant, I can't resist mentioning that the 'Americanism' "Train Station" grates, but the figures are impressive.

Hannah outlined her view of the future of the Scottish rail industry, and it was not surprising to learn that the establishment of Great British Railways has opened a lot of, so far, unanswered questions. We know that Transport Scotland is liaising with the English Department for Transport and expect

that it will take some time to sort out how Scotland's Railway will fit. One of Hannah's bullet points contained the thorny question of "Ownership of Infrastructure vs other assets in Scotland".

In the Q&A session after Hannah's talk, Bill Reeve - Transport Scotland's Director of Rail, who was in the audience - delivered a gentle reminder to FoFNL that we should remember to give credit for the extremely large amount of money which is spent each year on Scotland's railways. I think it's fair to say, that when talking about what we think the FNL and the other Highlands railways need, we are always pointing out the deficiencies - that's part of our job - and we probably do appear to take the Scottish Government's expenditure on rail for granted. We are fortunate indeed in this, but that mustn't stop us from making the case for where some of the money should be spent, especially when at the same time huge sums are being allocated by the government to unnecessary road improvements.

The two Network Rail speakers, Lee Ross, Infrastructure Maintenance Delivery Manager, Perth; and Alan Ross, Director Engineering and Asset Management, gave detailed accounts of their respective roles and the work they oversee.

Some of the figures are quite astonishing, and reminded us of the complexity of running a safe railway and meeting the challenges of ageing structures and equipment, and the weather.

This is the part of the industry which the public rarely sees, or is aware of - we'd soon notice if it weren't carried out properly though.

As you look at Lee's figures [right], remember that these are just for the railways covered by the Perth Delivery Unit.

Both Lee and Alan talked about the major work done on the Far North Line in June and the benefits it brings to the resilience and comfort of the railway.

Alan showed an interesting slide about Network Rail's analysis of passengers' use of the FNL, which finds eight discrete markets.

Track Headlines	
Wet bed removal	497 bays
Lubricate fishplates	16,177 joints
Track patrolling (BVI only)	12,743 miles
Stress CWR	4.86 miles
Unload ballast	6,418 tonnes
Renew rail	3.97 miles
Replace sleepers	1,449 sleepers

S&T Headlines	
Track circuit services	1,590 services
Level Crossing checks/services	1,619 tests
Wire degradation checks	383 cables
Veg clearance at location cases	632 locations
Cable route visual inspections	191 miles
FPL tests	1,441 point ends
Semaphore signal services	309 services

Off Track Headlines	
Boundary inspections	979 miles
Boundary repairs	28.4 miles
Level Crossing lining/painting	2.45 miles
Access point maintenance/repairs	1,709 locations
Inspections of DDD trees	1,048 trees
Drainage system inspections	499 miles
Vegetation chemical spraying	34,256 m ²

Far North Line Passengers

Through the mobile network data payment, card data and other sources, eight markets have been identified along the Far North Line

1. **'Inverness to Alness'** – Relatively short distance commuting and leisure market from nearby residential area to Inverness
2. **'Inverness – Tain'** – Middle distance market on the route, marking the extent of commuting to the central belt on this corridor, but also including some leisure travel
3. **'Inverness – Wick/Thurso'** – A longer distance market beyond Tain serving leisure journeys and lifeline journeys to Inverness, such as specialist hospital visits.
4. **'Inverness, Beaulieu, Muir of Ord'** – Commuting and leisure journeys between these three areas.
5. **'Inverness, Beaulieu, Muir of Ord, Conon Bridge – Dingwall'** – Commuting and leisure journeys between these settlements and Dingwall
6. **'Dingwall - Alness'** – Local Journeys in this part of the corridor
7. **'Alness – Tain'** – Local Journeys between these settlements
8. **'Thurso – Wick'** – Local Journeys between two urban areas in the north of the corridor.

As 2025 marks the 40th anniversary of the introduction of RETB on the Far North Line (having been installed on the Kyle Line the previous year), Alan also talked about how this works, and brought some examples of the equipment with him.

All three sets of slides will be available on the FoFNL website.

As a 'thank you' to our excellent speakers each was presented with a box of chocolates from Caithness Chocolate, a Wick company. A visit to their website - <https://www.caithnesschocolate.co.uk/> - is a tantalising experience!

Ian Budd



Neil Wallace took this photo of the line-up at the end of the conference.
From the left - **Alan Ross**, **Ian Budd**, **Lee Ross** and **Hannah Ross**.

MINUTES OF AGM 2025

Held on 4 July 2025, 12:00 at Norseman Hotel, Wick, Caithness

SEDERUNT

Total 31 members - recorded separately.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

11 apologies received - recorded with sederunt.

1 Welcome

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

2 AGM Minutes

The Minutes of the previous AGM, held in Inverness on 22 June 2024, had been circulated. No objections or amendments had been received.

Adoption of AGM 2024 Minutes:

Proposer: *John Brandon*

Seconder: *David Start*

3 Reports

Reports by Convener, Membership Secretary and Treasurer had been circulated in advance of the meeting, and questions were invited.

CONVENER'S REPORT

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

TREASURER'S REPORT

David Start explained current issues relevant to the accounts. In answer to a question about whether to consider becoming a registered charity, he advised against this due to added responsibilities and greater complexity.

Adoption of accounts:

Proposer: *Ian Budd*

Seconder: *Ian Watson*

Election of Independent Examiner of Accounts:

Roland St Clere Smythe BA FCCA

Proposer: *David Start*, Seconder: *Les Turner*

4 Election of Officers

Convener - Ian Budd

Proposer: *Neil Wallace*

Seconder: *Mike Willmot*

Secretary - Vacancy – to be filled at a later date.

Treasurer - David Start

Proposer: *Iain MacDonald*

Seconder: *John Brandon*

Membership Secretary - Richard Mansfield

Proposer: *Mike Willmot*

Seconder: *Ian Watson*

Newsletter Editor - Ian Budd

Proposer: *John Brandon*

Seconder: *Richard Ardern*

5 Election of Committee

• Colin Alston

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

• Ken Thomson

Proposer: *Ian Budd*, Seconder: *Iain MacDonald*

• Iain MacDonald

Proposer: *John Brandon*, Seconder: *Les Turner*

• Les Turner

Proposer: *Richard Mansfield*, Seconder: *Richard Ardern*

6 AOB

Ian Budd expressed thanks to **Neil Wallace**, who was standing down as Secretary after over 5 years, having recently been elected Chair of the Scottish Association for Public Transport.

The meeting closed at 12:35 after some general discussion.

Neil Wallace - Secretary

My sincere apologies to Neil - when I was drawing up the list of election candidates, and being aware that he was standing down as secretary, I forgot that I needed to include him on the list of committee members. The committee has now co-opted Neil until the next AGM.

Ian Budd

CONVENER'S REPORT

The twelve months since the last Convener's Report have been especially eventful and there is clear interest in, and support for, the Far North Line.

Before covering some of those events, I wish to pay tribute to two members of our committee who passed away recently:

Malcolm Wood was our secretary from 2014 until 2019, and during this time, as well as fulfilling his secretarial duties, he responded to the Far North Line's poor reputation for timekeeping by keeping detailed weekly records of FNL train service lateness and cancellation from October 2016 until lockdown in 2020. This was an invaluable resource for us when we needed to back up our campaigning for improved infrastructure on the line. Even through the final stages of his illness Malcolm stayed on the committee and made a point of attending last year's AGM.

Angus Stewart was FoFNL's membership secretary for 24 years, i.e. for most of the group's existence. This is a vital and sometimes difficult task, which Angus ran with great efficiency right up to being admitted to hospital in January. Angus' special interest was freight and it's a great disappointment that he didn't live to see the resurgence of freight on the Far North Line which we all hope and wish for. I would like to thank Richard Mansfield for agreeing to take over the membership mantle, and I will be asking you to confirm him as Membership Secretary during our AGM.

On a happier note, 2024 marked the 150th anniversary of the completion of the railway from Helmsdale to Thurso and Wick. This was to have been celebrated on the actual date in July but industrial action on the railway put paid to that. Perhaps this was a blessing in disguise as the change of plan also changed how we marked the occasion and I believe the end result had a greater impact.

We compiled a photographic exhibition jointly with the Highland Railway Society, the Scottish Association for Public Transport (which had been responsible for 1974's centenary celebration) and the Far North Line Community Rail Partnership. Along with history and

description of the line there were two panels dedicated to the work of two photographers who live near the FNL - Niall Laybourne and Peter Moore. They both take beautiful pictures of trains passing through the wonderful scenery.

The exhibition was displayed for a few days in three places - Thurso's North Coast Visitor Centre, Inverness Library, and Dingwall Community Library. Many people visited the exhibition which was very well received.

In November we finally had the chance to unveil a 150th anniversary plaque in Wick station. This was provided by Network Rail and unveiled by our president, Jamie Stone MP. We also displayed the exhibition in the station that day to mark the occasion.

The last year has seen two important contributions to our campaigning. In December The Highland Council passed a motion unopposed, which basically stated that THC must become more vocal in pressing the Scottish Government to invest in the Highland railways so that "The Highlands [must] have fit for purpose railway connections".

The second important contribution was the publication of a study carried out by Strathclyde University's Department of Marketing to look at the reasons people choose not to use the train. The work was commissioned by FoFNL in conjunction with Network Rail and ScotRail and was particularly attractive to the two rail organisations as they don't normally have much information from people who never use the Far North Line.

Since the publication of the study three members of the university lecturing staff, including Dr Davis who organised and carried out the work, have become involved in working out ways to use the study's findings to bring the railway more to the forefront of the minds of those who live in, work in or visit the north of Scotland. There will be more news on this later in the year.

As usual, various meetings have been arranged to enable discussion about how the FNL can be improved, including with Hannah Ross, CEO of Scottish Rail Holdings, who is speaking today; Mark Ilderton, ScotRail's Service Delivery Director; Matt Powell, Network Rail's Head of Sponsorship, and Alasdair Smart, ScotRail's

Tourism Manager.

There have also been site visits to the Inverness Signalling Centre; Inverness TMD, to view the installation work for the high-speed broadband trial and to a section of track near Brora to view the £11.5m track repair and renewal project in action.

Our magazine, which as well as being sent to all our members, goes to around 150 people in the 'rail universe' and the political world, continues to gain recognition in high places. Alex Hynes, who was Scotland's Railway's Managing Director and is now Director General, Rail Services Group in the DfT; and Roger Ford, the influential and highly respected columnist in Modern Railways magazine have both tweeted photos of their newly-arrived copy, along with lovely comments about how much they enjoy reading it.

So far, no mention in this report of the 'stasis' that has gripped our railway's prospects of improvement for several years. There are some small signs that this may change, but nothing definite yet...

I'd like to conclude by thanking two people who have agreed to join our committee, subject to confirmation today, Colin Alston and Ken Thomson. We are looking forward to working with them, and in fact Colin and I have already attended a meeting, mentioned above, with Network Rail.

Finally I'd like to congratulate our secretary, Neil Wallace, on being elected to succeed the estimable Dr John McCormick as Chair of the Scottish Association for Public Transport. John held that position for an astonishing 38 years! Thankfully Neil has agreed to remain on our committee, providing a very useful link between us and SAPT, but unsurprisingly he intends to relinquish his FoFNL office at the AGM.

Ian Budd - 15 June 2025

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT

Members will be familiar with the name of Angus Stewart with his very long period as Membership Secretary. His death in January 2025 resulted in my appointment as Acting Membership Secretary for us.

The renewal of members with the new year was a busy time for my initial admin duties. Paying in a considerable number of cheques to our Bank at Eastgate, Inverness was interesting! It was a pleasure to meet with some of the staff who I engaged with. On the third visit to the bank over several weeks I was on good terms with the staff and procedures with "Bank Giro Credit Slips"

I am now aware there of a charge of 50p for each cheque being paid in to the bank. I was conscious of a small queue forming behind me during the paying-in process. Patience was necessary – the staff member appeared to be unfamiliar with this system of working or with the volume of cheques.

In my role it has been interesting to note the far and wide interest of the railway from Inverness to the Far North. We are blessed with all parts of the UK and people from abroad showing interest in what we are: 'Friends' of FNL.

I would like to thank everyone who I have engaged with in the first six months in this role. I thank Ian Budd and David Start for the assistance they have provided for me, and you as members for your interest and support.

**Richard Mansfield - Acting Membership
Secretary**

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

The following members have not yet given us an email address:

33, 235, 260, 261, 282, 349, 367, 373, 404, 480, 488, 539, 543, 586, 587, 624, 639.

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

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

Ian Budd

THE HIGHLANDS RAILWAY DEFICIT

The principal problem for the single track railways in the Highlands which connect Inverness with the rest of the network, is the shortage of sufficient passing loops to minimise out of course delays.

Two recent journeys between Inverness and Wick on 3rd and 4th July, for the FoFNL AGM, made me fully aware of the extent of the problem. A delay at Dunkeld can still be felt all the way to Forsinard and vice versa and other trains may be infected en route which then spread the virus.

A "Northern Powerhouse" funding for Scotland's Highlands railways is long overdue.

On 3 July, our 10:41 train north to the AGM delayed the southbound at Forsinard by 15 minutes and the next day the 16:00 from Wick had to wait at Forsinard for a similar period. There was some catch-up time in the timetable in Ross-shire but we had to wait at Invergordon for the delayed northbound and this almost jeopardised the connection for passengers intending to travel south to Perth and beyond on the 20:22 from Inverness. A member of station staff on the platform was shouting "Glasgow train - hurry along to platform 4 please!"

Inverness Station is pivotal to railway services throughout the northern Highlands and all three radiating lines are mainly single track. In its immediate vicinity the only double track section is the first seven miles of the line south to Perth and beyond, so late departures can lead to further problems on the HML, or the line to Aberdeen.

A passing loop at Dalcross seven miles out on the Aberdeen line was recently opened, but the one planned for Delmore two miles out from Inverness on the busy section between Inverness and Muir of Ord, shared by the Far North and Kyle lines, has been designed but so far refused funding. The need for the Delmore Loop was identified by the Working Group established by Ferguson MSP in December

2016. The design preparations have been long done and costed, but the wait for funding drags on and on.

This is serious, because the first train of the morning from Wick leaving at 06:18 and due in Inverness at 10:37 is used by passengers from all over the north to make connections to the south and east but also to attend appointments at Raigmore Hospital in Inverness. When the train is more than 19 minutes late by Muir of Ord, the train is held there for another 40 minutes to allow for the flight of two trains northbound to Wick and to Kyle which have connected out of the 10:27 and 10:34 Inverness arrivals from Glasgow and from Aberdeen. Currently, an intermediate block signal at Clunes does allow one northbound train to follow another in this section, but that doesn't help southbound travellers.

Long waits at passing places are a familiar feature of travelling on the line. Because there are so few, late running can result in much longer waits than scheduled, especially at the Forsinard loop which is 2¼ miles north of Helmsdale and 21½ miles south of Georgemas Junction. The need for an additional loop in one or both of these sections has long been recognised. It is common to experience a train going in either direction waiting for up to 30 minutes in the passing loop just south of Forsinard Station. This is a major weak point of the line because late running can be caused by the late arrival of connections from the south at Inverness or can cause delay to connections to the south.

Between Dingwall and Helmsdale there are other long sections: 12¾ miles from Dingwall to Invergordon which includes the station at Alness; 12¾ from Invergordon to Tain; 13½ from Tain to Ardgay; 9½ uphill from Ardgay to Lairg. The next three sections are each around 7 miles long taking us to Brora from where it is 11 miles to Helmsdale.

Future Prospects

The railway should become much busier with passengers and freight with the massive

developments taking place in Easter Ross for the Cromarty Firth Green Freeport. Nigg or Kildray could be developed as a railhead for the Nigg Bay developments. Evanton is likely to grow as a settlement for the future workforce and residents have already requested reopening of the station.

The other issue is the excessively long overall journey time on the FNL. The new December 2025 timetable repeats a familiar pattern of a minute added here and there. The service was much degraded/downgraded at the beginning of this century when the new TPWS (Train Protection & Warning System) rules were applied. Loop entry speeds were lowered. Consequently the end to end journey time was extended by 22 minutes in 2005. What had been a sub-4-hour journey time has been seriously extended such that the slowest train, the 07:00 from Inverness, now takes 4 hours 31 minutes to reach Wick.

For a reaction at the time to the FNL TPWS implementation, here are Mike Lunan's comments made in May 2006 (*FNE 37*):

Regular readers will know that I believe that we no longer have merely a belt-and-braces approach to safety (which could be argued as itself being too stringent), but we now have belt-and-braces-and-holding-nanny's-hand approach. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the unthinking installation of TPWS. I don't quibble with Lord Cullen's recommendation that TPWS be fitted, but I do question some of the locations (termini, for instance, where some trains now have to accelerate after passing the sensor in order to reach the right part of the platform). In our many passing loops TPWS sensors were installed for a speed across the switches of 15 mph. This despite the fact that locos used regularly to cross the same switches at 25 mph or

more in the bad old days. As a result, any speed over 15 mph results in an automatic application of the brakes (that's what TPWS is for), an automatic record of this in onboard computer, and an automatic punishment for the driver. An unthought-of consequence of TPWS on a long lightly-used line where there are no red signals to go through anyway. Unthinking is surely the right word to use.

Tony Glazebrook, the author of the 2016 **Far North Line performance study**, which led to the establishment of the Far North Line Review Team, wrote this about the TPWS installation:

Long loop speeds:

The very long passing loops at Muir of Ord, Invergordon, Ardgay and Brora add avoidable journey time, because the loop entry speed – caused by the nature of the hydro-pneumatic points – of 15 mph has not to be exceeded throughout the loop.

This appears to be limited not by track condition but by the simplistic application of the TPWS to these loops. Some other rural lines (e.g. Cambrian Coast) have a more comprehensive TPWS application design that allows a higher speed to be reached on these long loops.

The Highlands railway network is compromised by these deficiencies, so needs the sort of financial investment which does not seem to be registering with the Scottish Government.

The UK Government talks big about Northern Powerhouse Rail and the Mayors in the North of England press the UK Government for action. It would be good if the Highland Council; Perth and Kinross; Moray; Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City would do likewise with the Scottish Government, which is now directly responsible for ScotRail services.

Richard Ardern

Fast trains - slow railways...

Photo: Sandy Colley



RAIL MAGAZINE LETTERS

RAIL magazine carried two useful and heartfelt letters in issue 1036, May 28-June 11 2025.

SUBSIDISE THE RAILWAY AS AN ESSENTIAL PUBLIC SERVICE

We are going to have to change our mindset towards railways (heavy and light), and towards public transport more generally.

We constantly hear about 'subsidy this' or 'subsidy that', always implying that it is wasteful or unnecessary. Yet while passenger numbers continue to recover, the revenue isn't doing as well. It would therefore seem that 'subsidy' is very much in the railway's future.

But we should see it and frame it as Operating Cost - in the same way that roads don't have 'subsidy', they have a maintenance cost. Both road and rail are essential infrastructure for the functioning of our society and economy, yet only one is seen as necessary expenditure. The other has to beg to be worthy of funding.

HS2 is constantly bombarded for being 'too expensive'. Meanwhile, the new £9 billion Dartford tunnel is received without comment, especially when we know all this will do is lead to induced demand.

The 'pay its way' mentality must die. Transport in all areas provides greater benefits outside of the farebox than it does within - and you can only grow revenue so much. Thus, the railway should be seen and run as a public service that provides transport, not profits for shareholders. This is also why freight should be renationalised, or Great British Railways should establish a Freight Division.

If we as a country are actually serious about achieving modal shift and lowering carbon emissions, then the mentality and mindset from all quarters and social strata must change.

Adam Scott, Market Deeping

INVEST IN THE HIGHLANDS AND FAR NORTH

It was good to see RAIL's Mystery Shopper sampling what Scotland's Railway has to offer in the Central Belt (RAIL 1031). However, the opening comment ("Scotland's railways have benefited from major investment where it is needed the most - commuter routes") struck me as debatable.

As a Central Belt resident for over 40 years, but also convener of the Friends of the Far North Line, I have to question fundamentally the assertion about where there was most need. The most people - yes. The most need - absolutely not.

For at least the past 50 years, there have been good, fast, reliable services in the Central Belt, while the railways in the Highlands have languished as single-track lines with a few widely spaced passing loops. We now refer to this as the Highlands Railway Deficit.

Average speed for the inter-city routes into Inverness is shockingly low, and on the Far North Line even worse. There is no spare capacity for the modal shift of freight, and very little enhancement has taken place in the past few decades.

The Highland Main Line received a modest £57 million spend a few years ago, resulting in the



improvement of two passing loops. But that didn't even include lengthening them so that 775-metre freight trains could pass.

The Inverness-Aberdeen line has seen significant investment, especially at the south-eastern end, but it still cannot offer the badly needed fast hourly service owing to a lack of passing loops.

Meanwhile, on the Far North Line we have been campaigning for 20 years for the installation of a loop on the line's erstwhile only double-track section, shared with the Kyle Line. Everyone, including the Scottish Transport Minister, agrees this is necessary. But it has not been built.

The lack of this loop quite often causes late arrivals of one-hour or more into Inverness, as slightly late trains wait nearly 14 miles away for northbound departures to clear. Elsewhere on the line there are gaps between loops of 24 and 21 miles on the northern section, causing long delays and lack of capacity.

Quite simply, accountants and politicians apparently don't see the railway system as being of benefit to the whole country. They just count passengers and residents, and invest accordingly.

Despite expressions of support from Transport Scotland, which insists factors such as economic development and social inclusion are considered, this shows no sign of changing.

On a related note, it was great to read Mr Dawson's letter, Fun on the Far North, in *RAIL* 1032. We concur with his views about the line's attractions.

I was surprised to read that ScotRail missed the opportunity to sing the praises of the Request to Stop kiosks - once a few initial issues had been ironed out, they seem to be a great success and are definitely making the railway more user-friendly.

Our only disappointment is the lack of other language options on the kiosks. This has required the installation of multi-language instruction signs at Dunrobin Castle station for its many tourist passengers.

It would be surprising if the system were not rolled out at all other request stops around the UK.

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

MONEY NO OBJECT

[WWW](#)

Meanwhile in a galaxy far, far away...

The United Arab Emirates is giving serious thought to building an underwater rail tunnel, suspended from floating supports, and featuring transparent walls so that travellers can admire the views beneath the Arabian Sea.

The tunnel would connect Dubai with Mumbai, covering the nearly 1200 miles from the port city of Fujairah to the Indian coast.

High-speed trains would be designed to travel at between 400 and 600 mph, meaning the train journey would be quicker than flying.

Dr. Ahmed Al Hariiri, who leads the UAE's National Advisor Bureau, commented, "This is not just about transport, but an immersive experience", although he surely didn't mean that in the sense that many potential travellers might fear!

Besides passengers, separate pipes would carry oil to India and water to the UAE.

This puts our need for a passing loop at Delmore into a different perspective - one has to wonder which will be completed first.

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Question S6W-35900: Jamie Halcro Johnston, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 1 April 2025

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address reported concerns that the cost of rail travel in the Highlands is disproportionately higher than that in urban areas, and what consideration it has given to supporting rail routes serving rural and remote communities to provide a viable alternative to car travel.

Fiona Hyslop: Eligible residents of the Highlands benefit from the Highland Railcard, which provides 50% off rail fares at any time of the day and is now available with ScotRail's 'Kids for a Quid' offer.

Following the conclusion of Peak Fares Removal Pilot, ScotRail has introduced a 20% discount on all season tickets until 27 September 2025 and permanently improved the value for money of Flexipass tickets, which offer significant savings to passengers.

ScotRail will continue to develop fare initiatives to attract more passengers while providing savings and additional value to existing rail users.

Question S6O-04816: John Mason, MSP for Glasgow Shettleston, Independent, taken in the Chamber on 19 June 2025

To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the proposed establishment of Great British Railways and any potential implications for devolved responsibilities over rail services and infrastructure in Scotland.

Fiona Hyslop: I, and the Government, are clear that full devolution of rail is in Scotland's best interests, not least to deliver the services that our communities and economy need and deserve. I am proud that ScotRail in public ownership has been a success and that ScotRail's train performance and passenger satisfaction are consistently higher than the Great Britain average.

I welcome the intent of the UK Government's rail reform bill—I have discussed it twice with the Secretary of State for Transport—and the commitment to protect current devolution of powers and learn from the example of Scotland's integrated approach to track and train. I want to continue to work constructively with the secretary of state to protect and enhance Scotland's interests, but I am concerned at the lack of clarity and detail in the proposals to date.

John Mason: I thank the cabinet secretary for that reply, but her final point about the lack of clarity concerns me, too, given that the idea has been around for a long time. Can she assure us that the Scottish Government will resist any attempts to take decisions on, for example, ticket prices or rail investment back to London?

Fiona Hyslop: I have repeatedly sought assurance from the Secretary of State for Transport that any decisions made by the UK Government will not dilute Scottish ministers' existing powers. Scottish ministers will do all within our power to protect the interests of Scottish railways in order to allow us to continue to build on the success of bringing ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper into public ownership for the benefit of the people of Scotland. However, unless and until we see text in the bill that secures accountability for integrated rail services to this Parliament and this Government, that risk still exists.

Question S6W-38425: Stephen Kerr, MSP for Central Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 18 June 2025

To ask the Scottish Government how many senior officials have been involved in the Intercity rail fleet replacement project since 2023.

Fiona Hyslop: Investment of such scale is approved by the Investment Decision Making Board comprised of Directors and Chief Executive of Transport Scotland. The aforementioned senior officials have been involved in the project at various stages, as required.

Question S6W-38427: Stephen Kerr, MSP for Central Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 18 June 2025

To ask the Scottish Government what environmental conditions or targets there are for the procurement of the new Intercity rail fleet.

Fiona Hyslop: Rail contributes just 1.2% to Scotland's total annual greenhouse gas emissions from transport, offering a sustainable and environmentally friendly way of moving both people and heavy goods.

Whilst there are no specific conditions or targets related to the future fleet which is sought to replace High Speed Trains, any replacement fleet is expected to be more energy efficient and therefore to reduce emissions.

Question S6W-38721: Willie Rennie, MSP for North East Fife, Scottish Liberal Democrats, answered on 7 July 2025

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S6W-32419 by Fiona Hyslop on 17 December 2024, when it plans to publish an updated Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan.

Fiona Hyslop: An update to the Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan is currently underway and is planned to be published later this year.

Question S6W-39279: Claire Baker, MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife, Scottish Labour, answered on 29 July 2025

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an updated timetable for the application and allocation process for freight facilities grants, including when the projects will receive their funding.

Fiona Hyslop: Freight Facilities Grant for 2025-2026 opened to applications on 7 April and closed on 1 May. Any company which wants to move freight by rail or water rather than by road and which is proposing to invest in new freight handling facilities in Scotland or re-invest in existing facilities in Scotland was able to apply for an FFG. Applications were considered against published criteria on what is and is not eligible under the scheme.

Applicants will be informed of the outcome of their bids shortly. Payment of grant to any successful applicants will be made no later than 31 March 2026.

Question S6W-39561: Ash Regan, MSP for Edinburgh Eastern, Alba Party, answered on 13 August 2025

To ask the Scottish Government what policies and strategies it has in place to facilitate a freight modal shift to rail.

Fiona Hyslop: The Scottish Government has shown leadership in setting out positive policies that work for the rail freight industry through our rail freight strategy (published in 2016), our first of a kind regulatory growth targets for rail freight as part of our High Level Output Specification for Control Period 7 funding, and our mode shift grants. Scotland was the first UK nation to have a rail freight growth target and this focus is being retained with a target of 8.7% for the period 2024 to 2029 and a requirement for a longer term growth plan to be delivered by 2027. These policies have encouraged positive behaviours and collaborative working with the industry to grow rail freight and have been supported with investment of over £40 million in recent years in rail freight specific projects and over £421 million in wider projects with rail freight benefits. We will continue to maximise benefits for freight in our future investment in the rail network.

SATELLITE BROADBAND

We're delighted to report that the trial of low earth orbit satellite broadband on the Far North Line is going well.

With 158725, the first unit to be equipped, having been in service for a few months, work began in the second week of August on fitting out the second unit. The other four will follow, with the full trial running from the end of September.



As we reported in May's issue of *Far North Express*, each unit is found to be different when panel covers are removed to reveal existing wiring and pipes. This is not helped by the existence of some inaccurate drawings for these old trains.

ScotRail tells us that the feedback from passengers and staff on the first unit has been very good.

As soon as passengers board a train equipped with the fast broadband they'll spot the stickers which are being placed throughout the units.

I.B.

BATTERY TRAIN DISTANCE RECORD

A demonstration run of GWR's former District Line unit, 230001 took place overnight on 20 August. The aim was to beat the world record for the longest journey on a single charge and at the same time achieve 200 miles to help celebrate *Railways 200*. The previous record, made by a Stadler train in Germany in 2021, was 139 miles.

It wasn't a serious attempt to show that these trains are ready to do such journeys in service, more as a demonstration of the way things are progressing in battery development.

The train ran at a modest speed of around 35 mph, travelling from Reading-London Paddington-Oxford-London Paddington-Reading. At the end of the run it was estimated that there were around 55 miles left, with one of the six batteries remaining unused.

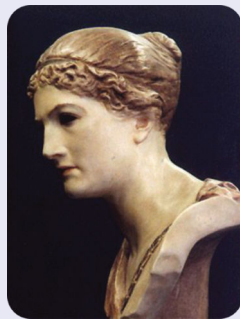
GWR's Engineering Director, Dr Simon Green commented, "Today's record attempt has been a bit of fun, but it also underlines a serious point: investment in battery technology is essential as we look to replace our ageing diesel fleet."

Of course, all this is very relevant to the Scottish 'rural' lines like ours, with ageing stock which will have to be replaced with something fairly soon. Discontinuous electrification comes to mind, but knowing that Roger Ford of *Modern Railways* magazine is so against it rather takes the shine off the idea.

Adding charging stops on the Far North Line would probably more than obliterate the obvious benefit of more powerful trains being faster on gradients. Scotland, and the UK, don't seem to be wealthy enough to do the right thing and simply electrify everything as the Swiss did. Even in 1936 Swiss railways were 70% electric, which compares with the UK figure of 38% - except that figure was for 2023.

I.B.

CASSANDRA writes



Trains in the south-west of England will run at 40 mph (where the line speed is 85mph) for several miles as the clay soil had dried to such an extent that it is no longer stable. What a mercy that the decision was not taken by the police, always keen to close a road for several hours after an RTA, for had it been so trains would not have been permitted to run at all. Trains in Scotland didn't run at all on 4 August because of exceptionally high winds. Trains throughout the country will run more slowly in October and November because leaves falling onto the line will result in black-ice-like adhesion problems. And lest non-railway transport should be forgotten it's worth remembering that road bridges in Scotland were closed, or open only to cars, when those high winds blew, also disrupting ferry services.

Scotland has always been a windy place, and one not without the occasional rainy day, but it's clear that the climate is changing in ways that produce new and seemingly intransigent problems for transport and its infrastructure: Cassandra is not alone in observing this. And Cassandra does not for one moment believe that the folk who look after the infrastructure don't know perfectly well what is happening, and - much more important - know what ought to be done as things gradually become more troublesome.

Victorian infrastructure has either stood the test of time or it has been replaced by something better. Bridges and tunnels don't last for ever and are monitored regularly. Cuttings and embankments, open to the elements as tunnels are not, deteriorate more quickly as hotter summers both dry the soil and encourage vigorous tree growth; heavier rainfall weakens already dry soil and gives the trees even more encouragement.

Cassandra knows that the railway industry knows all this, and that there are plans to deal with what is needed to keep the trains running safely. But she is alarmed that there is no discussion in the public arena about what will be needed, and what it is likely to cost - both in money terms and in the inevitable disruption to services. Cassandra remembers the economic cost to the Devon and Cornwall economy when a severe storm breached the line at Dawlish; Cassandra fears that the next couple of decades will produce more, and more severe, similar occurrences.

RAIL 1042 contains a couple of articles which illustrate the problem. c2c, which serves South Essex, is also suffering from dry clay and has also introduced a reduced timetable. Operators across Britain are concerned about excess lineside vegetation. One driver says that a serious accident is "waiting to happen"; Network Rail is accused of "losing control of its estate". And yet, in an article celebrating the new East West railway connecting Oxford to Bletchley (and ultimately Cambridge), the environment and sustainability team boasts that "over 400,000 trees have been planted". Lest any optimist hope that they have been planted at least 100m from the rails there is a picture showing the nearest to be only 10m away.

In the meantime Cassandra repeats herself. Trees are very thirsty: a mature oak needs 300 litres of water a day, so cut down the trees, also ameliorating autumn leaf-fall. Plant twice as many well away from the railway. It's a win-win policy: fewer trees causing damage; more trees elsewhere; lots of employment.



DANGER TO LIFE

At the end of her comments Cassandra exhorts Network Rail, and lineside landowners to cut down the trees.

The threat to railway safety from falling trees is obvious. So is the solution, but with a disregard for safety which no government would condone if an airport or its flights were threatened in a similar manner, there seems to be no specific legal requirement for the owners of trees beside railway lines to ensure they are far enough away to be safe in the event of a storm.

The somewhat less common arrival of a summer storm on 4 August brought the issue into sharp focus again when a large section of a tree landed on the overhead wires near Stirling and hung there.

Of course, trees are even more at risk from high summer winds as their leaves offer more resistance than winter trunks, branches and twigs.

There appears to be no specific legal requirement on the owners of lineside trees to do anything more than a rather vague duty to ensure that their trees are safe. This is of course open to interpretation to say the least.

One firm of lawyers offers this advice:

If it transpires that you own the tree, you have a duty to ensure that the trees on your property are safe. You will need to check the tree regularly for signs of damage or disease and carry out routine maintenance to remove dead branches and other hazards, which may require the advice and services of a specialist tree surgeon. It is important that you record the time and extent of your inspections and what, if any, maintenance you had to carry out as a result, bearing in mind that the purpose is to minimise the chances of passers by being hurt.

It goes on to say:

If your tree overhangs someone else's property, they are entitled to remove the intruding branches back to the boundary line but should return the branches / wood / fruit back to you as the land owner. Your neighbour can only enter your land to cut back any branches with your consent. If, however, the tree is subject to a Tree Preservation Order (TPO), local authority permission must be sought before any work is carried out. Check with your local authority if you are concerned that any of the trees for which you are responsible are protected.

When it comes to tree debris i.e. leaves, twigs and sticks, there is no obligation to pick up leaves that blow on to someone else's land. However, tree debris could cause a drain blockage resulting in flood damage (for instance). Therefore, it would be prudent to check, as part of your regular inspection process, that tree debris is not causing, or likely to cause, any hazards.

This certainly suggests that Network Rail might be able to construct a case against a negligent tree owner, but it would be far simpler to enshrine in law that you may not have a tree above a defined height less than a defined distance from the boundary with railway land.

Of course, many home owners would be affected by this, and might not be too pleased. However, if shown a photo of the wreckage of the driver's cab after a train struck a fallen tree, they shouldn't have too much difficulty understanding the issue.





Photo: BBC



Photo: ASLEF

Under the heading "What happens if someone makes a claim?" another legal firm offers this advice:

There is no obligation on owners or occupiers to guarantee that trees are safe. What is reasonable care will depend on the specific circumstances, including your financial means. If you can demonstrate that you have assessed the risk posed by trees on your land and have devised and implemented a reasonable policy for managing that risk, you should be in a good position to defend a claim.

As with any claim situation, having good records of inspections, maintenance and decision making is key and can be crucial to proving that you have not been negligent.

On 27 December 2023 a train travelling at 84 mph hit a fallen tree near Broughty Ferry [above]. In the two seconds from seeing the tree, to the collision, the driver managed to survive by dropping to the floor. In the subsequent accident report the Railway Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB) stated that "Dundee City Council did not effectively manage the risk of trees falling from its land onto the adjacent railway lines."

The danger to rail safety isn't just from high winds. Autumn leaves have been responsible for two recent accidents, one near Salisbury and one on the Cambrian Line in Mid Wales [right], in both instances trains simply slid along the track for considerable distances before colliding with another train.

On the Far North Line there are many places where trains are brushing hard against foliage which has been allowed to grow on railway land. Network Rail is of course well aware of this and is working to remove, or cut back, the offending plants. Unfortunately the legacy of British Rail's relaxation of foliage control once steam engines were no longer setting it on fire looms large, and there is still much to be done.



Photo: RAIB

Is it too much to ask the Scottish Government (or even the UK one) to legislate so that lineside trees are no longer near the railway?

BENEFICIAL BLOCKADE



Just before Christmas last year we heard that there was to be a three-week blockade of the Far North Line in June. My initial reaction was the obvious one - what an unfortunate choice of dates, just as the tourist season is getting into full swing.

In conversation with Network Rail it became clear that when planning major works involving disturbing the trackbed, and the use of heavy equipment, weather and daylight hours are the dominant factor.

In recent years we've been aware of the ongoing debate about blockade vs overnight/weekend closures. On this occasion it's hard to see how this work could've been done without closing the line - there would have been months, or possibly years, of disruption which would have done ridership figures no favours.

For us it meant moving our AGM & Conference either much later, or just into the school holidays. We chose 4 July - not as one member suggested, to avoid the risk of President Trump being around - but hoping that we wouldn't lose too many attendees as a result, whilst keeping to the usual time of year. For ScotRail it will have been a disappointing interruption to the tourist season, but definitely worth it in the long run.

In April I was invited by Heather Noller, Network Rail Scotland's Public Affairs Manager, to view the works in progress at Brora. This was a great opportunity to see the side of railway operations invisible to the public - even if it meant having to drive up from Glasgow because there were no trains!

Living so far from the line it is difficult to really get to know the line, except from inside the train, so I took the opportunity to stop off at a few places for a look round.

First of course I had to take my life in my hands and drive up the dreaded A9 to Inverness. The hype about dualling this road really is totally over the top - there's nothing unique to the A9 about dangerous overtaking. It would have been better to have spent a little of the planned £3,000m+ a long time ago, on making safe the dangerous junctions where many of the accidents happen, on this and other Scottish roads, and to have used the rest on genuinely necessary transport infrastructure, such as passing loops on the FNL and HML - the safe way to move people and freight.

My first stop was to have a look at the wonderful use that's been made of the handsome station building at Meikle Ferry. This station was open for only 4½ years, and was the terminus of the Far North Line for nine months until Bonar Bridge opened in October 1864. It closed on 1 January 1869 and became an inn, continuing as a place of refreshment right up to the present.



I was hoping for a cup of tea, so imagine my disappointment when I discovered that it was closed that afternoon, and in fact was due to close permanently a couple of weeks later. I had a long chat with the owner and another staff member, who I found sitting at a table outside. They were very disappointed to be closing down, but kindly allowed me a chance to look inside.

At the time of writing the building is awaiting a buyer - perhaps someone will follow Graham Rooney's lead in Tain and establish another fine restaurant there, to make up for the one which has been lost.



My next stop was Ardgay - another of the four remaining station buildings of my favourite design, the same as Meikle Ferry. Often described as Italianate, the fifth, Alness, was sadly lost to vandalism in the 1970s, the others are Kildary (closed) and Fearn. I was at Ardgay to see for myself the possibility of establishing step-free access to Platform 1, since wheelchair-bound local residents and visitors are currently unable to use this station. Like several others on the line, the attractive Highland Railway footbridge is in urgent need of repair and repainting. It is on Network Rail's list of projects and will cost around £170,000 to refurbish.

Since my visit we have learned that Network Rail has a planning application in to do major work on Platform 1, but inexplicably it does not include step-free access. We have challenged this.

From there I drove to Golspie, taking the road cut-off to Bonar Bridge. I had found an excellent B&B near Golspie station from where I would set off the next morning.

Whilst driving up I had received messages from BBC Scotland asking me to phone them. It turned out that they wanted me to do a radio spot on Good Morning Scotland about my visit to the NR work site and my views on the £11.5m investment. This was a great opportunity to publicly welcome the project and to express the hope that in the near future there would also be investment in some new infrastructure on the Far North Line. I was asked to phone the next morning at 06:20 to be interviewed. I assumed that the interview would be recorded for later use, so was surprised as I sat on the bed in my pyjamas and phoned, to be told, "As soon as the Indian gentleman has finished

talking about yesterday's air crash you'll be on - can you hear him?" Luckily I'd jotted down lots of things I wanted to say on a row of paper scraps laid out on the bedside cabinet, so managed to cover most of them!

Arriving in Brora far too early for the 12:00 appointment with Network Rail, I headed off for a walk towards the sea, largely following the route of the erstwhile narrow gauge Brora Colliery Tramway, which terminated at the salt store and salt pans near the shore. A tourist information board explained that Salt Street [right], where I ended up, was once part of the tramway's route.



Once back, a quick phone call to



Network Rail's temporary base in the farmer's field, with a pile of replaced rails on the left and a mountain of new ballast on the right.

Heather established where I would find the Network Rail team. NR had rented a farmer's field for the duration, to use as a store and base for operations. As expected, there were huge piles of ballast, new rails, old rails, new sleepers etc. This was the moment when I learned my first new fact of the day: the re-railing was using bullhead rail, except at crossings, where flat-bottomed was needed.

The shorter of the two stretches of work in the project. It involved renewing the rails and sleepers on a five mile stretch between Brora and Helmsdale, as well as replacing any damaged chairs. The cast iron chairs which fix the rails to the sleepers last a very long time. Many of those on this stretch showed dates from the 1930s in LMS days! If undamaged they were re-used, so will almost certainly reach their century very soon.



Once kitted out in safety gear, the visitors' party, which included a BBC Scotland film crew, and an observer from Transport Scotland, climbed aboard our transport which would take us the two miles to that day's work site. Our train was rather interesting, consisting of a road/rail vehicle with a grabber, used for heavy lifting, pulling a four-wheeled flat wagon with two cages mounted on it, in which we stood. Luckily the weather was excellent - the main hazard was sunburn.



On arrival we received a no-nonsense lecture about safety - always at the forefront of Network Rail's concerns, then we were shown what was involved in the actual work. This was when you could see the obvious - 60' long rails are *heavy*. Once in place they would be held together with pairs of fishplates (also known as 'splice bars' or 'joint bars'). Four bolts hold the fishplates through the rail, tightened using

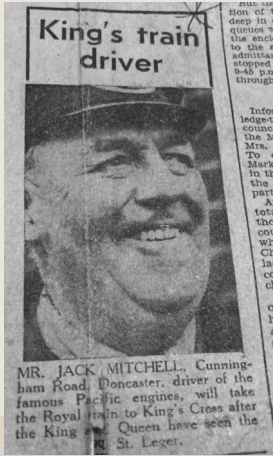
torque spanners.

It was interesting to see that railway work still requires much heavy manual labour, in spite of modern technology.

Whilst chatting to Heather on the return journey to the depot I



discovered that she comes from a railway family from Doncaster - home of the LNER and where Flying Scotsman and Mallard were built. Her great-grandfather, Jack Mitchell, was employed at the works in the 1920s and 30s, when those famous locomotives were being constructed, and worked as an engine driver into BR days. Heather later sent me a photo of a newspaper cutting from 1948 when he had the honour of driving the Royal Train, saying "Network Rail is more than just a job for me really, I've always loved the railway."



The other work site was between Invergordon and Fearn, involving the complete replacement of nine miles of track. This will undoubtedly deliver a much smoother ride.

Network Rail's website gives an idea of what was achieved during the blockade:

"A team of specialist engineers carried out the work using traditional track-laying techniques, changing thousands of sleepers and installing around 9 miles of new rails. "Drainage improvements and new ballast also enhance the line's resilience to extreme weather and give passengers a more comfortable journey.

"Over the 3-week closure, a total of 6720 hours were worked by Network Rail staff on a 24/7 shift pattern.

"Colleagues also took part in 49 hours of volunteering in the local community, including making new planters from old railway sleepers for Brora Station platforms, and holding STEM and ecology talks at Brora Youth Group and Golspie High School."

It is well-known that Network Rail takes community engagement very seriously. The work they do can often be locally disruptive for a period, so it is well worth ensuring a good relationship with residents.

Happily, this ambitious project was completed on time, and the first trains ran over the rejuvenated track on Monday 30 June.

This was a relief for us too, as our AGM & Conference in Wick was coming at the end of that week!



New rails in the middle, discarded ones on the outside.

Photo: Network Rail

Ian Budd

MIND THE GAP

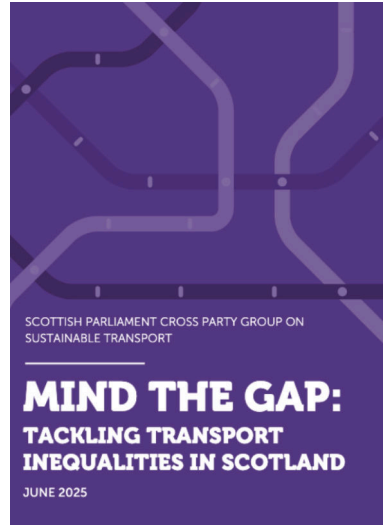
The Cross Party Group on Sustainable Transport published a report of its 2024-25 inquiry into transport inequalities in Scotland.

The report, authored by the group's secretariat, Transform Scotland, of which FoFNL is a member, covers the whole topic in great detail.

The report is available [on our website](#), with a link on this issue's companion page. The Executive Summary and the report's recommendations give an idea of what was covered, and what should be done to improve access for all to public transport.

Mark Ruskell MSP, one of the group's Vice Conveners commented, "This report helps focus minds on what transport policy should be delivering for the most vulnerable in our society. Get that right and we'll have better transport options for all."

To this we would add that what we refer to as the "Highlands Railway Deficit", the result of the difficulty of making a 'business case' for investment in railways which serve areas with smaller populations, imposes inequality on all residents and visitors who wish to use Highlands railways.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

[WWW](#)

Transport plays a vital role in enabling access to work, education, healthcare, and social connections. But in Scotland today, too many people are being left behind by a system that doesn't recognise or meet their needs. From high costs and unreliable services to safety concerns and physical inaccessibility, transport inequalities are reinforcing wider patterns of social and economic exclusion. These issues are particularly acute for:

- Low-income households
- Children and young people
- Women
- Disabled people

About the inquiry

In 2024–25, the Scottish Parliament's Cross-Party Group on Sustainable Transport launched an inquiry to understand how Scotland's transport system contributes to inequality — and what must change. Over four themed evidence sessions, the Group heard from experts, advocates, and community representatives. Across all groups, similar challenges emerged:

- Unaffordable fares and limited concessions
- Inaccessible services and poor rural connectivity
- Lack of reliable, frequent public transport
- Safety concerns, especially for women and disabled passengers
- Exclusion from transport decision-making processes

Recommendations

The inquiry heard from witnesses on the themes of transport poverty, children & young people, gender, and disabilities. The 'key messages' at the end of each section of this report highlight the witnesses' views as to how problems in each area can be alleviated. In this section, we present four cross-cutting recommendations which, if implemented, would provide a pathway towards the proactive reduction of transport inequalities.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Define transport poverty & collect the data that will allow it to be alleviated

1.1 Adopt a shared **definition of transport poverty** which includes affordability, availability, accessibility, reliability, and safety; and develop metrics for each dimension to allow progress towards its alleviation be monitored and evaluated.

1.2 Mandate **systematic collection of disaggregated transport data**, including trip purpose, frequency, mode, and intersectional demographic information, to inform budgeting and to monitor progress against transport poverty indicators.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Tackle transport inequalities through participation and budgeting

2.1 Require all transport authorities (local, regional & national) to implement **lived experience participation** through co-design with those most affected by transport inequalities, to identify unmet need and ensure that services are shaped by the voices of those who need them most.

2.2 Ensure that all transport authorities apply **equality budgeting** to ensure investment decisions prioritise the alleviation of inequalities suffered by children & young people, women, disabled people and those on low incomes. This is grounded in the Fairer Scotland Duty, which since 2018 has placed a legal responsibility for public bodies to "reduce inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage, when making strategic decisions".

2.3 Require **health impact assessments** of transport plans and policies to identify how they are likely to affect different population groups and their wider impacts on health and wellbeing.

WHEELS OF CHANGE

Another in-depth report which has just come to our notice was actually published over a year ago in June 2024.

Wheels of Change: Promoting Fair and Green Transport in Rural Scotland, is published by IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research), an independent charity working towards a fairer, greener, and more prosperous society.

The report, written by Dr Maya Singer Hobbs and Stephen Frost, research fellows at IPPR, received funding from Sustrans and Transport Scotland.

At the time of publication, Scottish Government policy was to achieve a 20% reduction in car kms (car use) by 2030. The government has now admitted that this is unachievable, identifying only a 3.6% reduction so far, from pre-Covid levels, and is currently in the process of setting new targets.

The report has little about rail, which is hardly surprising when its subject is rural Scotland, most of whose railways were closed in the 1960s, and before, because they weren't profitable - a laughable concept in the first place. It mentions that respondents still feel aggrieved at having had their railway removed by the Beeching Cuts.

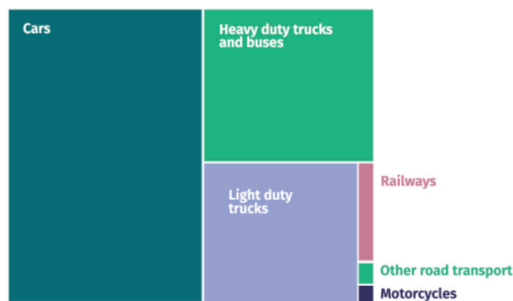
However, the points made in the report resonate strongly with our ambition to improve provision of rail services in the Highlands to the point where people feel able to switch voluntarily and trust rail for many of their essential journeys. It is well worth reading this short document right through, as it has some startling observations about how difficult transport can be in rural areas.

The inescapable conclusion is that those within reach of the Far North Line are fortunate, yet it could be so much better with some serious investment.

[WWW](#)

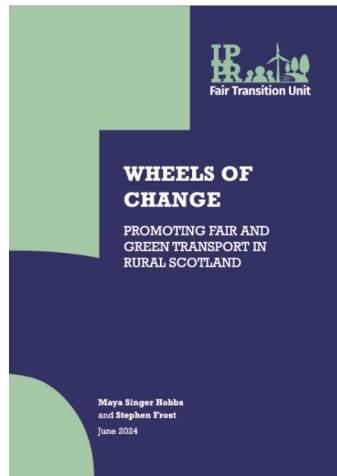
FIGURE 1.2: CARS ACCOUNTED FOR OVER 50% OF ALL LAND TRANSPORT EMISSIONS IN SCOTLAND IN 2021

Greenhouse gas emissions (CO₂e) in Scotland of all land transport in 2021 (%)



Source: National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory (2023)

A particularly interesting graphic appears on page 9 of the report. The subject of 'decarbonising' the railways is often under discussion, but a quick look at this graphic shows that rail's contribution to harmful emissions is almost microscopic compared with that of road traffic. Perhaps a more relaxed view of the need for interim solutions prior to electrification, especially of the main intercity routes, might be sensible.



REPORT SUMMARY

Transport in rural Scotland is not working for the people living there, particularly those on low incomes. Despite various strategies, road maps and reports, people living in rural Scotland do not feel their transport needs have been considered. At best, many feel the system has not got worse. But for others, declining bus provision and the cost of living crisis has had a significant negative impact on their experience of getting around.

The Scottish government has committed to a 20 per cent reduction in car miles by 2030 (from a 2019 baseline). This is a climate-driven commitment, but it provides an opportunity to reconsider the transport system to make sure it works for everyone. Good quality transport systems mean that people have access to employment, education and other public services. It plays a key role in preventing isolation and loneliness and is important for local economic activity. However, the Scottish government is off track to meet its net zero commitments. Car use in Scotland has continued to grow, while bus provision and patronage have fallen.

This work drew on in-depth interviews and a workshop with members of the public living in rural Scotland on low incomes to understand what their experience of the transport system is like. Through this process a series of themes were identified. Using these and the workshop, a set of principles to guide transport policymaking in Scotland were identified.

- Action should be taken first by those who are most able to make changes: this includes people who are wealthy and/or live in cities and those who make unnecessary car journeys.
- People in positions of power (political, financial or otherwise) should lead the way: decision makers and businesses must be seen to be making changes to reduce their emissions.
- Infrastructure first: for people to make changes there need to be viable alternatives, and they need to feel that they have a choice which goes beyond just car ownership or buses (for example, safe

active travel routes or trains).

- The aim should be to make the transport system fairer: this means that some will have to reduce their car use, but others will see their mobility increase.
- Engagement: the needs of people living in rural areas vary significantly, and those who will be impacted should have an opportunity for meaningful engagement.
- Affordability: public transport must be made more affordable to ensure it is accessible to those living on low incomes.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Using the principles as a starting point and building on other findings throughout the research, there are three overarching recommendations to fairly address rural transport emissions and reduce car kilometres:

- The Scottish government, in conjunction with Transport Scotland, must set out a credible delivery plan for reducing transport emissions and car kilometres by 2030 and beyond. The plan must clearly set out how the goals to reduce car use will be achieved, including how the benefits of reducing car dependency across the whole country will be felt in rural areas.
- Identify, fund and champion anchor towns and communities which should provide public services and transport hubs for people living rurally. Anchor towns should ensure people can 'live well locally' by providing necessary public services. Transport hubs should support multimodal trips, and have good public transport links to surrounding areas and safe active travel routes.
- People living in rural Scotland must be engaged and involved in transport decision making. Regional transport authorities should establish deliberative processes to ensure policies and ideas can be discussed with those who are commonly marginalised in decision-making processes, including people living on low incomes, minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities and young people.

BRORA SUCCESS STORY



WWW

Another reason to travel on the Far North Line has opened in Brora. The Clyne Heritage Society, led by Dr Nick Lindsay, has nearly completed an ambitious project to convert the Old Clyne School to become the Brora Heritage and Clyne Kitchen. Dr Lindsay will be a familiar figure to those who attended our 2019 AGM & Conference in Brora, where he gave an excellent talk about the history of the Brora area.

King Charles visited on August 6th for the official opening. The 50-seat café and retail space opened to the public towards the end of August and the exhibition section will follow in the Autumn.

A feature of the outdoor patio area is a 5m-high sculpture, created by Jon Asanga, of a Megan Boyd salmon fishing fly made up of hundreds of stainless steel rods. In the fly fishing world Megan Boyd, who lived in nearby Kintradwell, was a legendary fly-tier.

The re-purposing of the old school was not a simple task, but the result is a first-class heritage hub and eatery.

The society has managed to secure the services of chef, Steven Oglesby, who previously worked at



the Royal Marine Hotel in Brora, for some 20 years. The plan is for the café and gift shop to provide three-quarters of the revenue of the operation. The society employs Ross Lewin, who had previously always worked in hotels and hotel management, as Hub Manager.

This facility adds to an already attractive part of the Far North Line's route, and could soon become part of a day-trip-by-rail itinerary for visitors.

I.B.

A NUCLEAR FUTURE FOR THE NORTH LINE

Richard Ardern came across this article from the Railway Digest Scotland from August 1988. It's interesting to read some views from the time - some of which have echoes now.

Had these proposals come to fruition the present occupants of Altnabreac Station House would certainly have been living a quiet life somewhere else - perhaps not beside a functioning station!

Lord Thurso who owns many thousand of acres in Caithness, much of it situated in the now famous "flow country", has agreed to a request by NIREX, the nuclear waste disposal agency, to investigate the suitability of land at Altnabreac for a deep storage facility.

It is not the job of this magazine to argue the pros and cons of nuclear waste disposal in Scotland or elsewhere, the decision to use land at Altnabreac will be made by others after public consultation, we are concerned only with the effect this decision may have on the railway system.

For those of you who have never visited the area it can only be described as one of the most bleak and remote areas in Britain, easily on a par with the wilds of Rannoch Moor on the West Highland or Druimuachdar Summit on the Highland Main Line.

Altnabreac retains its station, although now relegated to the status of a unmanned halt, offering no passenger facilities whatsoever, not even a seat. Once this station served the nearby Lochdhu Hotel, still standing as an empty monument to the great days of Victorian confidence. The tiny community of two or three houses is about to lose its school and much of the area around the station has now been planted with conifers by a private forestry company.



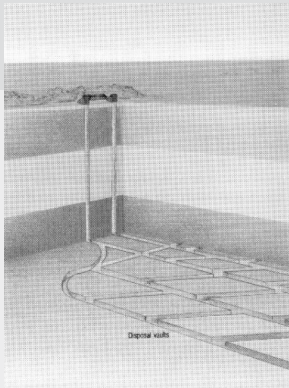
track which leads to the station situated about half-a-mile beyond the hotel. This last section of track is in much better condition than the first six miles due to upgrading by a private forestry company who have planted all the area in the photograph (PA).

[Left] A general view of Altnabreac Station, the modern building is a private house but the typical Highland Railway Water Tank and Column survive. (PA).

[Below] Lochdhu Hotel, now empty but in very good condition stands over the bleak moorland at Altnabreac.

In the foreground is the





[Left] Artist's impression of the deep level disposal vaults at the land-based repository.

Should the area be used for nuclear waste disposal the railway line offers the only sensible method of transporting this waste. Altnabreac is at the end of a rough track almost eight miles long, which itself commences from a minor single track road over six miles long before reaching the A895 trunk road.

Railway Digest Scotland wrote to NIREX to ascertain their position with regard to rail transport and the likely volume of traffic. They considered the presence of a rail connection to be a factor in favour of any specific site (wherever in Britain it is identified). By contrast, the absence of a nearby railhead would be a factor against such a site. However, it is not so substantial a factor as the presence of a

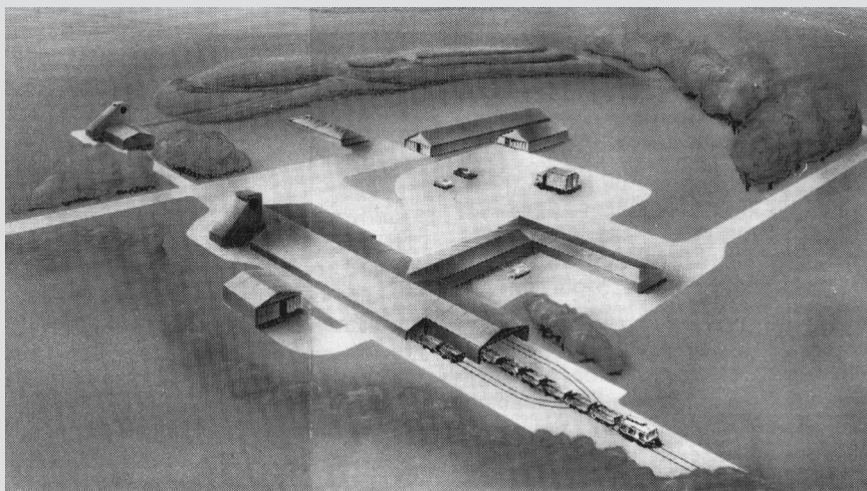
suitable hydrogeological environment.

They expect that if all the solid low level and intermediate level radioactive waste they anticipate consigning to a deep facility were to travel by road, in conventional I.S.O. vehicles, then some 100 lorries would arrive at the facility each week.

The national policy is to store these wastes for fifty years, by which time the NIREX facility would be full. High level waste would not be involved as this is owned by British Nuclear Fuels and is stored at their Sellafield site in Cumbria, which is, of course, rail served, and has contributed greatly to the revenue of the Cumbrian Coast Line.

It would seem therefore that if such a facility were to be constructed at Altnabreac it would secure the future of the North Highland Line for the next fifty years and could even influence the building of a rail bridge across the Dornoch Firth.

If only a fraction of the money now being spent on improving the A9 road was available to the railways, perhaps we could even see a rail connection to Dounreay thus diverting this dangerous traffic away from the roads. At the same time a short branch to Scrabster would allow the railways to compete for the high volume of container traffic destined for Orkney.



An artist's impression of a land-based repository.

FEARN STATION IN GAUGE 1

On the 8th of May an interesting, and unusual, request came our way:

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

"Friends of my parents at the Inverness Model Railway Club suggested getting in touch with you. My parents were members for many years but have now both died. They were very keen modellers working in Gauge 1, the club has taken away one layout which they can still use for exhibitions but we are left with a 44 foot long model of Fearn railway station which we would love to find a home



for. I have attached some photos, it was also featured in British Railway Modelling. I was wondering if you could advertise it amongst your members, free to a good home but will need to be dismantled and collected by the new owner, or if you have any other suggestions for where I could advertise it. It is currently near Tain."

The message was accompanied by some photos which showed an

amazing model. Gauge 1 is a scale not often seen in home model railways since the track is 45mm wide - more than twice that of 00 Gauge. It was clear that for the person who'd contacted us to have to demolish her parents' work would be soul-destroying.

FoFNL could help. We would email our members and put the request up on our website and our Facebook page. It's a very large layout so we didn't think that it would be easy to find it a home.

The Facebook post received a positive response a few minutes after it went up, even better the layout might be able to be kept in



Fearn itself.

It is now likely that the layout will actually find a permanent home in the Patersons Fishing Stores - Seaboard Heritage Centre which is currently being developed in Hilton, near the fishing village of Balintore, only a short distance from Fearn Station.

We put the layout's saviour in touch with Sheena, who's parents built the model, who told us, "It means a lot to all of us, we were dreading having to destroy it as we had all been involved in its creation and it is nice to know that it will live on."

We also had a response from Tain Museum which is too small to accommodate the layout, but was keen to use some photos in a display about it.

Of course, being a station on the Far North Line, there are no trains to be seen most of the time! Now all that's needed is a locomotive or two and some rolling stock. The new owner suggests some fish vans for the siding - my own thought was potatoes, remembering a story from *FNE* contributor Mark Nolan a few years ago.



Ian Budd



This is the kind of model which would look completely at home running on the Fearn Station layout.

Highland Railway *Ben Wyvis* is part of the James Kennedy Collection of Gauge 1 models which has been looked after since his death in 1984, and occasionally run at exhibitions.

FROM THE TRAITORS TO DOWNTON ABBEY

There must be few viewers watching *The Traitors* programme on television who realise the connection with the man who was responsible for overseeing the development of railways in the Highlands. This was Alexander Matheson who owned Ardross Castle, the setting for *The Traitors*, as well as two other mansions in Ross-shire – Dunraig Castle and Gledfield House in Ardgay.



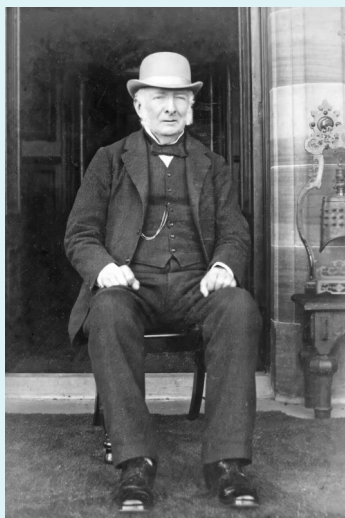
Ardross Castle - George Washington Wilson

[Aberdeen University Collection - Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY 4.0)]

The different homes of the Mathesons are detailed in the new biography of Alexander. This was conceived and partly written by Anne-Mary Paterson before her sad death, and then completed by myself. The Matheson properties included Hedgefield House In Inverness. This was lived in, first by Alexander's mother and later by his eldest son Kenneth. In between it was the home of Bishop Robert Eden before the Bishop's Palace was built on the Matheson Inverness estate.

Alexander and his family usually lived at either Ardross or Dunraig between early August and January which was then the parliamentary recess. As an MP for 37 years, Alexander had to be in London when the House of Commons was sitting and the family home there was in Mayfair. From his London home he could go to Parliament, the offices of the major trading company of Matheson & Company, of which he was chairman, and the Bank of England where he was a director.

Moving to and from his houses involved railway travel. One journey Alexander records in his diary was on 7th August 1883 when he had chaired a meeting of the Highland Railway board in Inverness and was returning to Strome Ferry which was then the station for Dunraig. In his diary he records that the train was over an hour late as a result of shunting at the stations. This was a reminder of the HR running mixed passenger and goods trains.



Alexander Matheson - [Anne Shellim collection]

After Alexander's death in 1886, Kenneth Matheson began selling all his father's property in the Highlands, beginning with Ardross, which was purchased by Charles Dyson Perrins of Worcestershire Sauce fame in 1898. One reason was the Matheson family's financial problems, but Kenneth also seemed anxious to sever his connections with Scotland. This is clear as he went on to buy several properties in England. At the time of his death in 1920 he owned an estate near Totnes in Devon, but in Scotland only a few farms in Lochalsh.

In 1913, while a house in London was being built for him, Kenneth leased Highclere Castle near Newbury which was Downton Abbey in another popular TV series. This historical drama featured the Crawley family. The lives of the real life Matheson family, as this book shows, were as interesting as their fictional television counterparts. And the deception of a member of the Matheson family in defrauding the family firm, which overshadowed Alexander's final years, was worthy of *The Traitors*.

Neil Sinclair

BOOK REVIEW

WWW

Alexander Matheson: The Railway King of the Highlands

Anne-Mary Paterson & Neil Sinclair, Highland Railway Society, 2025

ISBN: 978-0-9927311-3-7

Softback: 64pp, 165 x 240 mm. **£10.00** (£6.00 to HRS members) +£2.00 p+p. <http://hrsoc.org.uk/Publications.html>

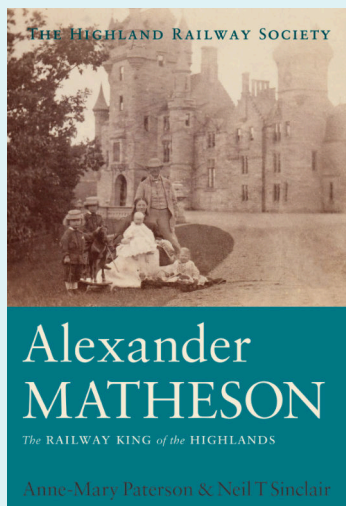
Neil Sinclair's completion of Anne-Mary's final work is a fitting tribute to an author who wrote fascinating books on railway subjects, each taking an aspect of railway history and bringing together all the vital strands of the story - placing them in their historical context and tying them in to the fabric of the world as it was at the time.

The story of Alexander Matheson explains how he made a vast fortune, partly on the back of a trade which would now seem immoral, but which was not seen that way in the United Kingdom of his time.

In many ways Anne-Mary's book is a tribute to a man who has not really been given his rightful place in the story of the Highlands, and of the Far North Line in particular.

I have to confess, in my reviewers role, that this is "my kind of book". It's full of surprising facts, especially memorable being the story of Matheson's involvement in the building of the first commercial railway in China, which was closed and dismantled by the Chinese government 15 months after opening.

This is an engaging, friendly, and very readable account, which I don't hesitate to commend to all with an interest in the Far North Line and its history.



FNL SUMMER



Direct Rail Services 68005 is seen erupting out of Forsinard while working the 13:11 Tain - Georgemas Junction on a DRS Route learning job on 13 August 2025.

PHOTOS BY KYLE TRICKER

A shot I've always wanted to get at Ardgay. ScotRail Class 158717 is seen coming to a stop beside 158711 at Ardgay. 158717 was working the 16:00 Wick - Inverness. And 158711 would later work the 19:29 Ardgay - Inverness on 8 August 2025.



ScotRail 158710 is seen speeding towards Dalchalm level crossing, north of Brora, kicking up some dust from the new ballast while working the 10:41 Inverness - Wick on 30 June 2025, the day services resumed after the blockade.