

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



Issue 97
January 2026



THE MAGAZINE OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

£3.00

CONTENTS

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|----|--------------------------------|----|
| Headcode | 3 | Not in Scotland | 18 |
| Twenty Years of Scotland's Railway | 4 | Ardgay Accessibility | 19 |
| Station Usage Figures | 8 | Conon Bridge | 20 |
| Pandora | 9 | Railway Rescue | 21 |
| GBR Conundrum | 10 | Far North Line Fame | 22 |
| Rail Recharged | 12 | Calling Photographers | 23 |
| Alex Hynes Given Top Job | 13 | Titled Steam Enthusiasts | 24 |
| Public Opinion | 14 | The Lochinver Railway : Part 1 | 28 |
| Wither Highland Rail? | 15 | <i>Dunrobin</i> Update | 32 |
| Letters to the Press | 16 | FNL in the Museum | 35 |



www.fofnl.org.uk/fne97.php is a companion page with some web links and larger versions of pictures found in this issue. This sign on a page denotes available material: [WWW](#)

FOFNL OFFICE BEARERS

President:

Jamie Stone MP

Vice-Presidents:

Rhoda Grant MSP

Maree Todd MSP

Convener and Editor:

Ian Budd, *Bishopbriggs*

Hon. Secretary:

Vacancy

Hon. Treasurer:

David Start, *Tonbridge*

Membership Secretary:

Richard Mansfield, *Inverness*

Committee Members:

Colin Alston, *Oban*

Iain MacDonald, *Alness*

Ken Thomson, *Culloden*

Les Turner, *Inverness*

Neil Wallace, *Kiltarlity*

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

Website:

www.fofnl.org.uk

Facebook:

www.facebook.com/fofnl

E-mail:

editor@fofnl.org.uk

Editorial Address:

3 Villafield Loan,

Bishopbriggs,

Glasgow , G64 3NZ

FAR NORTH EXPRESS IS PUBLISHED IN JANUARY, MAY AND SEPTEMBER

Front cover: West Coast Railways 37685, *Loch Arkaig*, standing at Brora while exchanging the token to Rogart. Having left Inverness in the early hours of 3 January, by midday 37685 was returning from Wick/Thurso having completed its route proving run.

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 begin by wishing all our readers a happy and enjoyable New Year. This is an important year politically as we will usher in a set of new/returning MSPs after the election in May. We have no political view on the railway, we just want it to be funded enough to solve what we refer to as the Highlands Railway Deficit - a reference to just how far behind the Central Belt the quality of our services has fallen.

Whilst we no longer keep accurate records of FNL services a quick look at the *Recent Train Times* website revealed unsurprising, but nonetheless disappointing figures.

In the 6-month period up to 7 January, northbound and southbound services showed around 30 days each where at least one train was cancelled (excluding days of very strong winds or heavy snow when few/no trains were running).

Punctuality was far below ScotRail's target. Northbound the best service, 07:00 ex-INV, averaged 88% arrival up to 5 mins late; the worst was the 14:00 at 68%. Southbound the Sunday 11:58 averaged 81%, closely followed by the weekday 12:34 at 80%; the worst was the 16:00 at 56%. In that period 19 northbound and 20 southbound services were more than 30

mins late with the worst being a 72 minute delay southbound and an 85 minute delay northbound. Several others were over 1 hour late.

The reasons for this poor performance are varied, but boil down to insufficient infrastructure (i.e. passing loops), unreliable rolling stock and a high level of train crew illness.

It is no wonder that our railway has a reputation for being unreliable - yet this is the quality most needed and expected of any rail service.

We fervently hope, and expect, that the new intake of MSPs, no matter which party they adhere to, will recognise that people in the Highlands are entitled to a good reliable railway service which meets their needs, and begin the process of providing it.

This issue of *Far North Express* contains a higher than usual proportion of items which are neither news, nor pleas for more funds to be made available. It would have been wonderful to be in a position to list some exciting improvements on the horizon, or a revelation that the Class 158s are about to be replaced by some newer, reliable trains.

Ian Budd

FOFNL AGM & CONFERENCE

[www](http://www.fnofnl.org)

This year's event will take place on **Friday 19 June** at the **Lovat Arms Hotel** in **Beaulieu**, beginning with the AGM at **10:45**. The hotel is near the station and the starting time is to accommodate travellers from the north who should arrive at the station at 10:21.

We're delighted to be welcoming **Jim Summers**, former Regional Operations Manager, British Rail Scottish Region and **Graeme Cook**, Director of Rail Delivery, Transport Scotland, as speakers - the third guest speaker is still to be confirmed.

As always, the conference, beginning at **11:30**, will be open to the public, and after each talk there will be the opportunity to ask the speaker questions.



TWENTY YEARS OF SCOTLAND'S RAILWAY

As our September edition went to press Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for Transport in the Scottish Government, submitted a Motion For Debate, which was taken in the Holyrood Chamber on 9 September.

The motion read:

That the Parliament recognises that it is now 20 years since the devolution of executive powers over rail funding, specification and strategy for Scotland's railway; celebrates the 15th anniversary of the completion of the Airdrie-Bathgate route, instigated by the Labour and Liberal Democrat coalition and completed under the Scottish National Party, the 10th anniversary of the reopening of the Borders Railway and the first anniversary of the reopening of the Levenmouth route; recognises the many significant achievements over those 20 years, including electrification of over 570 kilometres of track, the opening of 30 new stations, and an increase of a fifth in ScotRail passenger numbers; welcomes the consistent delivery of operational performance and passenger satisfaction under public ownership and control, which are among the best levels in Britain; notes the need to continue to improve those performance levels; welcomes the investment of £13 billion over this period to sustain and grow the network through value-for-money projects, including the complete renewal of the Caledonian Sleeper fleet and operation; notes the cross-party support for the removal, for good, of ScotRail peak fares, first piloted while Scottish Green Party ministers were part of the Scottish Government; looks forward to the benefits from developments such as the completion of the electrification of the East Kilbride route, and the progression of procurement of new train fleets and further electrification, including the recently announced Fife and Borders routes; recognises that the UK Government's current proposals for rail reform draw heavily on the widely recognised success of the devolved approach to rail in Scotland; notes the Scottish Government's position that full devolution of rail is the optimal position but, in the absence of full devolution, Scotland's railway must benefit at least as much from those reforms as is promised for England and Wales, and agrees that any reforms that would diminish the Scottish Ministers' powers and the role of the Scottish Parliament already constrained by current UK legislation would be unacceptable to the Scottish Parliament, given the success the delivery model in Scotland has produced over the last two decades.

Ahead of the debate Transform Scotland, of which FoFNL is an active member, submitted this useful briefing paper:

Key Points.

- Welcomes Scottish Government debate & **agrees with the content of the motion**, including with regards to **devolution of rail powers**.
- Welcomes decisions to **abolish peak hour fares** & to commit to **Fife/Borders rail electrification**.
- Notes **large backlog of ageing infrastructure**, in particular on inter-city and rural routes.
- Notes **poor alignment between broader transport policy and rail policy**.
- Proposes a **new set of priorities for Scotland's Railway**, in order to put passengers first.



1. Scottish rail strategy welcomed, but serious challenges remain.

Scotland's railways have long been a backbone of our communities — linking people to work, education, and leisure while offering a critical environmental alternative to car travel.

The electrification of routes in the Central Belt has been a success story, delivering efficiency, reliability, and environmental benefits. Last week saw two very significant and welcome announcements: firstly, the permanent scrapping of peak hour fares, and, secondly, the commitment to the electrification of the Fife and Borders railways with the procurement of new battery-electric trains.

However, beyond these welcome developments, ScotRail has struggled to recover its passenger base to the pre-Covid position – a 16% drop compared to before the pandemic [1] – and to provide the robust service required for a modern public transport system. Moreover, with services and amenities reduced — including fewer onboard catering options and constrained luggage capacity — the passenger experience, and ultimately patronage, has suffered.

2. Devolved powers required for continued progress to be made.

The success of the devolution of rail powers to Scotland can be measured by the number of railway and station re-openings and progress with electrification, 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.

3. Investment needed to tackle ageing infrastructure.

ScotRail has one of the oldest train fleets in Britain. On key intercity routes, the reliability of the Inter-City 125 fleet has been a persistent disappointment, leading to overcrowding and service disruptions. These failures ripple across the network, with reallocation of trains from other routes, like Fife, causing further disruption and passenger frustration.

Rural lines face equally significant challenges. Iconic routes like the West Highland and Far North lines remain plagued by outdated infrastructure and limited amenities, despite Scotland's scenic railways holding immense untapped potential. Scotland is home to rural lines running to its impressive western coastline, which are frequently featured in international travel guides as must-see destinations. Yet, these routes are often served by some of the most basic and outdated trains, lacking the comfort and services that overseas visitors might expect.

On inter-city corridors, the Government's infrastructure spending priorities remain badly misaligned. It has committed to spending in excess of £6 billion on new road capacity on the corridors from Perth and Aberdeen to Inverness. Yet no similar ambition exists for the parallel rail routes. The Highland Main Line has been left with infrastructure that the Victorians would recognise, while an Aberdeen City Deal promise that £200 million would be spent on faster line speeds north of Dundee has been reneged upon. *[Also the busy Inverness-Aberdeen line is still prevented from having an hourly service by the lack of a passing loop between Elgin and Keith - FoFNL]*

4. Lack of alignment between broader transport policy and rail policy.

Tackling car dependency is crucial to meeting the Scottish Government's targets. With the railways now government-owned, we would expect to see greater cohesion between improving rail services and facilitating traffic reduction. Scotland will need to shift around 6 billion car passenger kilometres a year to public transport, walking, and cycling by 2030. [2] To meet this goal, it will require more than doubling (110%) of rail passenger kilometres compared to pre-Covid levels. We need to see a coordinated and targeted plan for doubling rail demand and encouraging people to switch from car to train.

Focusing efforts where the biggest impact can be made is critical. The Edinburgh–Glasgow corridor presents a prime opportunity — ample rail capacity and a congested M8 offer fertile ground for interventions like car-parking charges and price incentive schemes to encourage a shift from car to rail. More targeted strategies like this could deliver meaningful growth without entering into the polarising debate about rising transport costs for people living in rural areas.

5. Putting passengers first: a new set of priorities for Scotland’s Railway.

If ScotRail is to thrive, its strategy must centre on passenger-centric solutions that address the real needs of passengers while supporting wider government objectives:

- **Simplify fares:** Confusing pricing structures remain a barrier to rail use.
- **Prioritise user experience:** Future train replacements must prioritise passenger comfort, accessibility, onboard catering, and adequate storage for bikes and luggage.
- **Improve service reliability:** Persistent issues with ageing rolling stock and unreliable services must be addressed to rebuild public confidence and accommodate growth.
- **Invest strategically:** Continuous, sustained investment in electrification is non-negotiable if Scotland is serious about ending its reliance on fossil fuels and modernising its transport network.

There were quite a few contributions to the debate from party transport spokesmen and a range of other MSPs. It's good to see that there are members from all parties in Scotland who take an active interest in rail. We were pleased to see references to the needs of parts of Scotland outside the Central Belt. It is a shame that some time in the debate was wasted with tedious point-scoring against the governing party - railway provision should be politically agnostic. Here is a selection of (mostly) useful comments made:

Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Transport): My concern about the rail reform that is being discussed at the UK level is that that vertical integration might preclude the governance arrangements that we already have. I have therefore made it clear in meetings with the UK Government that Scottish ministers will not accept any diminution of our existing devolved powers over rail, and that strong governance, accountability and assurance measures must be in place for the areas in which we set strategy and that we fund and specify. That is why a collective stance from the Parliament stating that is important at this time.

[It is a pity that all the unionist parties, being against Scottish independence, seem to see the moving of what is currently Network Rail Scotland Route to Scottish Government control as a kind of endorsement for splitting up the UK, as opposed to a sensible and logical way to run the railway.]

Sue Webber (Conservative Transport Spokeswoman): The Almond chord line would connect services from Fife to the west of Scotland and, with all the new houses that are being built in west Edinburgh, I know that commuters are crying out for that to be considered.

[Fife stations are already linked to the west of Scotland by existing track, except that no services make use of the facility. The Almond chord would simply give an alternative route between Linlithgow and Haymarket, via Edinburgh Gateway.]

Sue Webber: Rural lines face equally significant challenges. Iconic routes such as the West Highland and Far North lines remain plagued by outdated infrastructure and limited amenities, despite our scenic railways holding immense untapped potential.

The Scottish Government is committed to spending in excess of £6 billion on new road capacity on corridors from Perth and Aberdeen to Inverness, yet no similar ambition exists for parallel rail routes. The Highland Main Line has been left with infrastructure that the Victorians would recognise, while an Aberdeen city deal promise that £200 million would be spent on faster line speeds north of

Dundee has been reneged on.

Douglas Lumsden (Con): Outwith the Central Belt, our rolling stock is an embarrassment — something that the Government’s motion fails to acknowledge. The motion attempts to paint a rosy picture of rail services in Scotland, while the reality is that, in many parts of our country, the service falls way short of what is expected in a modern country and, in some parts, it is simply non-existent.

Emma Roddick (SNP): There are many things that I would love to see improved about our services and infrastructure in the Highlands. The doubling of the Highland Main Line has already been mentioned, which would reduce the impact of disruption as well as offer the potential for shorter journey times and more freight capacity. A loop — either at Lentrane or Delmore, I am not particularly fussed which one — would build resilience on the Far North Line, and there are other improvements that could move freight off our roads, and passengers out of cars.

A thriving rail network in the north of Scotland is crucial to decarbonising the transport system overall. We must support critical industries in my region, be it wooden pallets from West Fraser or whisky that is travelling from and to everywhere, to become more sustainable. That requires rail freight being a viable alternative to heavy goods vehicles on the A9 or the A96.

Finlay Carson (Con): My colleague Sue Webber, a long-time campaigner for Winchburgh railway station, called for new developments, saying that they should be aligned with areas of population growth. However, we must be cautious. Expansion must not come at the expense of rural and remote communities. Scotland’s railways must serve all of Scotland, not just the Central Belt. I will therefore use my time to shine a spotlight on the South-West, particularly Stranraer and the strategically vital port at Cairnryan.

Holyrood elections are rapidly approaching, and it's vital that we, and all the other rail campaigners, do what we can to interest the potential new members to take up the cause of improving Scotland's rail network, especially in the areas such as the Highlands, where many decades have passed since anything new was added. The railway is for the whole of Scotland, not just the parts where most people live.

The motion was agreed, 69 for, 44 against, with one abstention.

[Back to Contents...](#)

Ian Budd



A rare section of HML double track at the site of Culloden Station.

Photo: Sandy Colley

STATION USAGE FIGURES

Every year the Office for Rail and Road (ORR) produces statistics for station usage based on ticket sales. They cover 1 April to 31 March each year. The 2024-25 figures were published on 4 December 2025.

We've retained the format showing the comparison with pre-Covid numbers as a reference, giving a useful indication of post-Covid recovery. Sadly what seems to have happened is the opposite of a recovery. Only five stations show an increase over the pre-Covid figures, and these are all stations with small footfall so a relatively few more passengers can inflate the figures dramatically.

These figures will give ScotRail and Scottish Rail Holdings cause for concern. The reasons for the drop since 23-4 are not difficult to guess and all the organisations involved in the railway - the Scottish Government, Transport Scotland, Scottish Rail Holdings, ScotRail, ASLEF and RMT need to work together to remove the causes. Money will need to be spent, and the argument that a business case cannot be made for such expenditure because of the comparatively small number of people living in the area covered by the FNL needs to be dropped. This railway is an integral part of Scotland's infrastructure and must work properly.

Altnabreac has no figures for 24-5 because of the prolonged closure due to the behaviour of the Station House residents.

I.B.

| | 2019-20 | 2023-24 | 2024-25 | One Year Change | Change Since 2019 |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Wick | 16,664 | 16,726 | 16,046 | -4.07% | -3.71% |
| Thurso | 39,702 | 37,626 | 36,980 | -1.72% | -6.86% |
| Georgemas Junction | 1,570 | 1,588 | 1,992 | 25.44% | 26.88% |
| Scotscaid | 232 | 242 | 226 | -6.61% | -2.59% |
| Altnabreac | 232 | 250 | | | |
| Forsinard | 2,866 | 1,376 | 1,562 | 13.52% | -45.50% |
| Kinbrace | 456 | 606 | 406 | -33.00% | -10.96% |
| Kildonan | 214 | 240 | 312 | 30.00% | 45.79% |
| Helmsdale | 5,086 | 4,038 | 4,242 | 5.05% | -16.59% |
| Brora | 6,354 | 5,990 | 5,836 | -2.57% | -8.15% |
| Dunrobin Castle | 1,240 | 1,940 | 1,544 | -20.41% | 24.52% |
| Golspie | 5,586 | 5,320 | 5,352 | 0.60% | -4.19% |
| Rogart | 1,656 | 1,226 | 1,084 | -11.58% | -34.54% |
| Lairg | 6,264 | 4,180 | 3,978 | -4.83% | -36.49% |
| Invershin | 216 | 440 | 362 | -17.73% | 67.59% |
| Culrain | 312 | 300 | 318 | 6.00% | 1.92% |
| Ardgay | 6,408 | 5,674 | 5,734 | 1.06% | -10.52% |
| Tain | 28,036 | 23,672 | 23,284 | -1.64% | -16.95% |
| Fearn | 4,182 | 4,062 | 3,780 | -6.94% | -9.61% |
| Invergordon | 27,826 | 28,580 | 23,476 | -17.86% | -15.63% |
| Alness | 27,050 | 20,928 | 20,482 | -2.13% | -24.28% |
| Dingwall | 80,154 | 63,976 | 62,120 | -2.90% | -22.50% |
| Conon Bridge | 18,022 | 13,104 | 11,716 | -10.59% | -34.99% |
| Muir Of Ord | 70,850 | 52,306 | 46,002 | -12.05% | -35.07% |
| Beauly | 46,510 | 38,376 | 33,508 | -12.69% | -27.96% |
| Inverness | 1,214,648 | 1,169,550 | 1,172,640 | 0.26% | -3.46% |
| Total (excluding Inverness) | 397,688 | 332,766 | 310,342 | -6.74% | -21.96% |

PANDORA...

The GBR Bill: the fun starts

The Secretary of State will be required to issue a 30-year Long Term Rail Strategy. One hopes that, having done so, she will go away and do something else, allowing those responsible for implementing her strategy to do so unencumbered by any second thoughts. One hopes too that, as night ineluctably follows day, future holders of her office will refrain from tinkering.

While Scottish Ministers are, to a considerable degree, a law unto themselves as far as the railway is concerned, Pandora is concerned lest the SoS's requirements spill over the Border. Were they to do so some of her strategic objectives might prove awkward. They include:



Picture: DfT

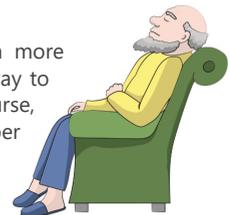
"Meeting the needs of ... passengers ... by increasing value for money" and at the same time "reducing costs to government". Value for money can only be increased by providing a measurably better service (in its widest definition), or reducing its cost while maintaining its quality. No action by government - or any other earthly agency - can change this simple truth. But the cost to government is to be reduced. See a circle, see a challenge to square it.

Further on more delights are to be found. Long-term economic growth is to be "catalysed" by "reducing journey time and cost for transport users". Pandora, the proud possessor of O-level Chemistry, would choose a different word from "catalysed", preferring the more straightforward "stimulated", but this is to strain at gnats. Cost is to be reduced, but - by implication - a lot of engineering work is going to be done to reduce journey times. Who pays? Not passengers, for their costs are to be reduced. Another factor to encourage growth is "facilitating home building and place-making". Pandora assumes that what is meant is "house building", but struggles to discern what "place-making" means. New Towns? Fine, but by definition there are unlikely to be railway stations in the places where New Towns might be built. The inhabitants of Corby, without a proper station for over 40 years, were not thrilled. Mind you, a New Town in the general area of Rannoch Station might improve connectivity by catalysing 25 miles of largely level new railway along Loch Erich to Dalwhinnie, a pipe dream long held by Pandora.

The best is kept to the end, however. The strategy will support "government's environmental stability objectives by ... protecting transport links by investing in climate adoption". No, Pandora doesn't know either.

Pandora earnestly hopes that when the Bill reaches the Commons a more thorough investigation of what the government actually wants the railway to look like will take place. Pandora is not holding his breath. (It is, of course, possible that all the matter in inverted commas, taken from the December issue of *Modern Railways*, is a succession of misprints.)

Are we different up here? Will journey times on the Far North Line be "reduced"? Will the Ben Alder Line come to be built?



GBR CONUNDRUM



This is one of those times when one could almost feel sorry for politicians. Having agreed, in a surprisingly non-partisan way, that the railways of Great Britain would work better, and cost less to run, if track and train were reunited, they were then faced with a conundrum. The railway in Scotland (and to a lesser extent in Wales) is run, and paid for, separately by the devolved government. The obvious solution would be to think about setting up three state-owned companies. The Scottish railway system is largely self-contained, with some cross-border services, which would automatically have been run by the English railway company. The Welsh system less so, with a far greater proportion of cross-border services.

Naturally we will consider the case of Scotland. And of course, by the time that the Westminster Government remembered that the Scottish railways are run separately it was probably already too late to do the obvious, because they had already come up with the name Great British Railways. It's hard, given that the pre-privatisation railway was called British Railways, not to think that someone - perhaps subconsciously - liked the word "Great" because it suggested greatness, whereas we all know that in this context it just refers to the largest of the British Isles. Of course, having named it thus they wouldn't want to let the Scottish part leave.

So now the conundrum has to be resolved. We need for Scotland exactly the arrangement GBR is set up to achieve - the seamless integration of track and train - but Scotland's railway is separate. Separately funded and separately operated.

For a long time, the Scottish Government has been pressing for Network Rail Scotland Route (the slightly non-intuitive title of Network Rail's organisation in Scotland) to be separated from the rest of Network Rail. This would end the current anomaly of the Scottish Government paying for its activities while its ultimate control is the responsibility of the DfT, which otherwise has little remit in Scotland.

It's been hard to see a *logical* reason for maintaining the *status quo*, unless there is a concern in Westminster that such a move would indicate tacit approval of Scotland functioning as a separate country, thereby appearing to support Scottish independence.

As we always point out, railways are a public service and should be immune from party politics. If Scotland were to have its own fully integrated railway system, where track and train are controlled by the same government-owned organisation, it would be easy to co-ordinate safety, and other operational concerns, with standards in the other countries of Great Britain. This is what happens in other parts of the world where railways cross international borders, so it would seem that political considerations do lurk in the background.

But now we have a new plan from Westminster, with track and trains destined to be run by one organisation (exactly as Scotland wants for itself). Except...how is the establishment of GBR going to deal with the devolved governments?

It is clear from the GBR Bill, which was introduced to the Houses of Parliament on 5 November, with a second reading on 9 December, that much work has been done on this already.

There are extensive sections in the Bill covering the definitions of who controls what in the areas of devolution. These cover not just Scotland and Wales, but also London and Liverpool, which have a mayoral system in place.

In these words from the DfT document *Consultation outcome - A railway fit for Britain's future* [Updated 5 November 2025, originally published February 2025] the need to maintain the current Scotland's Railway ethos is identified:

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.

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.

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 2 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.

Meanwhile, in the document, *Railways Bill factsheet: introducing and designing Great British Railways* [published 5 November 2025] we find this:

What will the new rail industry look like?

Scottish ministers will set a rail strategy for Scotland and fund GBR to provide infrastructure in Scotland. GBR will develop a Scottish business plan to set out its intended activities in Scotland.

The government is committed to supporting further integration between track and train operations in Scotland, either through a deeper alliance between ScotRail and GBR or through a corporate entity that would bring track and train management together in Scotland, such as a distinct GBR subsidiary or company jointly owned by GBR and Scottish ministers [*called ScotRail perhaps?*].

It is clear that the UK Government still can't quite bear to suggest that a wholly-owned Scottish company, separate from GBR, might be permitted, although elsewhere in the Bill it is suggested that the idea of a separate company jointly owned by the two governments might be the best solution. It's not clear what "jointly owned" would constitute - would the company still be subject to policies laid down in Westminster?

In a *Commons Library Research Briefing*, dated 4 December 2025, this slightly disturbing paragraph describes access to the GBR network:

The new access regime would require GBR to set out how its network can be best used, and give it the power to approve or reject applications for access to its network from non-GBR train operators (including London Overground, Elizabeth Line, Merseyrail, **ScotRail**, Caledonian Sleeper, Transport for Wales, open access operators such as Grand Central and Lumo, and freight operators). It would require GBR to retain sufficient capacity for its own services when considering applications from other train operators.

It really isn't clear whether track access charges, which will undoubtedly be made to freight operators and open access operators, would also apply to ScotRail.

We hope that further negotiations will secure a sensible settlement for the Scottish railway system.

A final word from a Scottish Government spokesperson, quoted in the research briefing:

"The Scottish Government position remains that a fully devolved railway is in Scotland's best interests, and we are disappointed this was not agreed by the UK Government."

RAIL RECHARGED:

Scotland's Fleet Transition Strategy

[www](#)

The long-awaited 'refresh' of Transport Scotland's *Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan* was published on 21 November, with the new title of *Rail Recharged: Scotland's Fleet Transition Strategy*.

Lack of funds has caused a massive retrenchment in the aspiration of removing diesel trains from Scotland's railways. In summary, the 50-year-old 17C HST units are to be replaced with 21 to 23-year-old diesel trains cascaded from East Midlands; the class 153/156 on the West Highland will be replaced with classes 158/170 released by the partial electrification of the Borders and Fife routes; the Far North Line trains will continue to be operated by 33 to 37-year-old class 158s.

The announcement contains some interesting words:

"Having a reliable, accessible, and affordable railway provides access to jobs which secures an income for people across the country, opens the doors to education and training opportunities for young people, ensuring they have the best start for a bright future. Our railway is for everyone and we work closely with our delivery partners to remove barriers to our services by ensuring improvements to accessibility are embedded in the work that we do." The question of accessibility is mentioned elsewhere in this issue of *FNE*.

In **Chapter 5: Rural**, the strategy states:

Scotland's transport network provides a lifeline for our rural communities and this undoubtedly extends to our railway. It is important that passengers from rural areas can continue to benefit from reliable, resilient, accessible and efficient rail services.

Beyond this our rural trains provide a front-row seat for passengers to admire Scotland's natural beauty from our mountainous regions to our dramatic coastlines these services truly highlight what Scotland has to offer. Every year tourists come to Scotland to see and explore these landscapes and our railway can provide a cleaner and convenient way for them to enjoy Scotland. Tourism is one of Scotland's most important industries and getting more people to visit our rural communities can help to boost local economies and growth.

Over time the diesel trains that operate on our rural routes will reach the end of their useful life and will be phased out from the network. This process will take time due to the geographical challenges of these lines and it may be the case that it is not a one size fits all approach in terms of our solutions for these routes. However, it is important that we develop a plan that can sustain these services while we explore the options for replacement trains.

Our Plan

As we progress with the replacement of our suburban fleet, this will free up the newer diesel trains that currently operate on the Fife and Borders routes. These Class 170s and 158s will be cascaded onto the rural network to replace the life-expiring diesel trains that currently operate on these lines. This will ensure that our rural communities continue to benefit from a reliable, resilient and more modern rail service.

We are keen to continue modernising our rural services, not just the way that the rolling stock operating on these routes is powered. It is important that our trains are equipped with the facilities that cater to passenger needs, particularly as there is overwhelming potential to capitalise on the rural leisure market.

The Far North Line is considered to be part of the "rural network", but the wording in the document

seems to contain a mismatch between this line and the future plans. The cascading of Class 158s from the partially electrified Fife and Borders routes will not provide the FNL with newer trains. Class 170s cannot operate on the line because their doors are too far from the carriage ends to be safe to open on sharply curved platforms. With no prospect of replacement trains on the FNL before the 158s reach at least 40 it's hard to reconcile that fact with: "It is important that passengers from rural areas can *continue* [my italics] to benefit from reliable, resilient, accessible and efficient rail services."

The current stated deadline for removing all diesel traction from the Scottish railways is 2045. In that year the FNL's oldest trains will be 53-56 years old. A great percentage of cancellations on the FNL at present is caused by rolling stock failure. As it says in the plan, "The older these trains get, the more difficult it will become to source spare parts and perform essential maintenance on them. This is likely to adversely affect operational performance, with the resulting burden falling disproportionately on passengers."

It's hard to see how the class 158s can continue until discontinuous electrification of the line is completed, so another source of diesel trains will almost certainly have to be found. Given the length of the journeys, perhaps some intercity stock similar to the class 222s envisaged for the HML and Aberdeen-Inverness lines would be the answer. Or, dare we suggest it, locomotive-hauled trains, in spite of their operational complications.

| Diesel multiple units class | construction dates |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| 156 | 1987-1989 |
| 158 | 1989-1992 |
| 170 | 1998-2005 |
| 222 | 2003-2005 |

Ian Budd

ALEX HYNES GIVEN TOP JOB

It was announced on 27 November that Alex Hynes has been appointed as the new Chief Executive of Department for Transport Operator Limited (DFTO) to lead the next phase in the transition to Great British Railways.

Alex is well known to the Friends of the Far North Line as the leader of the movement to bring track and train together as much as possible, in the form of the ScotRail/Network Rail Alliance, which he inherited when he joined Abellio ScotRail in 2017. He advocated for this constantly while he was Managing Director of ScotRail, so it is fitting that he should be chosen for the DfT post which will oversee the similar process now being put in place in the rest of Great Britain. The experience he gained working in Scotland for seven years will prove invaluable in his new role.

FoFNL sends Alex our congratulations, and wishes him well. We are confident that his understanding of Scotland, and its railways, will be good news for the way the implementation of Great British Railways is handled north of the border.



Alex Hynes, Director General, Rail Services at the Department for Transport, talking about Scotland providing the blueprint for Great British Railways, at Rail Live in June 2025.

Photo: Jack Boskett/RAIL.

I.B.

As anyone who reads newspapers or frequents social media will know, the Far North Line's reputation amongst its users is at a low point. Amongst its *potential* passengers who avoid using it, its reputation is even lower.

One of my Newsletter Editor predecessors - Roger Piercy - kindly keeps me up to date with relevant items from the *Ross-shire Journal*. On 2 January the paper's *Your Views* section featured some comments it's received online, which are worth quoting here. These made a pleasant change from the usual (often justified) litany of complaints. - rather an explanation of some of the causes:

Driver reveals train time challenges

New Highland train reliability figures have sparked a call from Highland MSP Rhoda Grant for the Scottish Government to improve the rail network on the Far North, Kyle, West Highland and Highland Main Line routes.

Iain Aitken wrote: "Speaking as a retired train driver, I can tell you that the biggest cause of delays by far, is signalling and temporary speed restrictions.

"The second tends to be over-staying at stations, which are normally allocated a whole 30 seconds. But when someone holds the door open because their pal's running late? Guess what that does.

"Also, there's the autumnal fun and games of leaf fall. Leaves get crushed up and turn into a lubricant slime on the rail head, meaning the trains are extremely difficult to stop, and tricky to get moving. Snow and flooding have their own problems and, believe it or not, hot weather can cause big problems too. And the world is definitely getting hotter."

Duncan McIntyre wrote: "The Highlands are the poor relation regarding rail travel."

But Andy Gabriel-Powell said: "And yet, go anywhere else on British railways and it's up yours if the train doesn't run, or you miss your connection. ScotRail get you home, or to your connection, and they've done that for me more times than I can remember and for that, they will always get my vote."

It's good to read a train driver's view about this and, in the light of recent criticism about the size of ScotRail's annual taxi bill, a bit of recognition for SR's efforts to avoid leaving passengers stranded.

Then on to roads, and here are a couple of comments which echo our opinion about the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness, which we regard as wasteful and unnecessary, while the genuine dangers of certain junctions have been allowed to remain, pending full dualling. Your editor also quite often has to drive on the A9, both south and north of Inverness, and is disappointed that successive governments have not tackled the main danger points.

Does Tomich junction need a roundabout?

THE notorious Tomich junction [near Invergordon] could be converted into a roundabout after being a "constant fear for road users," according to one local councillor.

Bob Leadbetter said: "At least one other junction on the A9 needs a roundabout, e.g. Munloch. I wonder how many unnecessary deaths could be avoided if the dangerous junctions were improved?"

Roddy Macdonald commented: "You could argue this case for all junctions on the A9."

The Highlands railways' reputation can only really improve when the infrastructure and rolling stock meet the basic requirement of reliability. There is no avoiding the fact that money needs to be allocated.

WHITHER HIGHLAND RAIL?

This heartfelt lament about the state of the Highlands railways was sent to us by a retired career railwayman who worked his way through the ranks holding a variety of commercial, operating and project management roles over his 43 years' service.

His experiences and frustrations unfortunately epitomise those of many FNL travellers. FoFNL is well aware of the root causes of many of the problems described, and how hard many individuals work to alleviate them, but the bottom line is still the same - the line's users just want it to work.

Until last autumn I was the owner of a second home; a one-bedroom flat overlooking Dingwall railway station. The 200% and now unlimited Council Tax surcharge on second homes forced the sale of what was for me a life-long dream. Residing in Kent, I've spent the last nine years travelling by rail, road and air between there and Dingwall, diligently keeping a record of each trip. No mode has been perfect but air proved to be most reliable, road by far the most dangerous whilst rail, well, very much a 'curate's egg'.

I was in a melancholy mood about my very last journey to Dingwall on Sunday 5th October by rail. I wanted it to be good, to provide a lasting happy memory. Sadly, it was not good and the experience brought to a head all my conflicting thoughts and feelings about Highland Rail and particularly the wonderful Far North Line. Here is what happened and the conclusions I came to:

It was the day after Storm Amy. Nowadays a named storm always seems to be an opportunity to give up and stop all rail services, so as I set off from London that Sunday morning, I knew everything north of Inverness was cancelled for the second day. Except it wasn't but that was a closely guarded secret, of which more anon. The 13:53 Edinburgh-Inverness had only partial seat reservation labels, so arguments and chaos ensued as a number of American tourists struggled to find somewhere to sit. All with large suitcases of course, mixed in with regulars and others with massive rucksacks. All crowded onto a single class 170. You get the picture. The saving grace was the conductor who dealt with the situation professionally and with great good humour.

As we left Edinburgh news came through of a tree blocking the line at Carrbridge. Or was it? Or was it two? Did anyone know? Seeing the conductor on the platform at Stirling talking

anxiously into his mobile phone told its own story, and sure enough our train terminated at Perth.

What to do? Premier Inn? Try a journey to Leuchars to stay with relatives? Or hope that the 15:46 would make it to Inverness as advised by station staff? And then what would I do? Taxi? Bus? One of those cheap rooms at the Travelodge? A forty-minute wait and instinct said get on the 15:46 ex-Glasgow Queen Street to Inverness HST, along with many others. It was on time, but not a good experience for those from Edinburgh. The overcrowding was something of which the London Underground would have been proud. I never knew the vestibule carpets on Inter7Citys were so uncomfortable and felt utterly ashamed of the industry as I surveyed fellow passengers and angry tourists who had paid often considerable sums, having to endure this. It was horrible, but worse was to come.

Arriving at Inverness the boards confirmed all Far North services were cancelled. No staff met the train. No one to advise passengers what to do. Pretty shambolic but fairly typical of what one finds at Inverness. You might think nobody cared.

To get to Dingwall that evening was either a taxi (but there were none when I looked) or the only service bus of the evening from Inverness to Dingwall at 19:55. An hour spent in Burger King, another 50 minutes watching the empty station concourse and blank departure screens, then it was round to the bus station (that's right, the one that will be rebuilt one day). The bus journey neatly topped off this ghastly journey as it was so overcrowded it had to leave people behind.

The crowning frustration? Sitting in my flat later hearing the dulcet tones of a class 158 running into Dingwall station with one passenger on it.

Yes, the final (21:06) train from Inverness had been reinstated, but no one thought to tell anyone who might want to use it.

So, why did this journey bring to a head my thoughts and feelings about Highland Rail? Simple. For every five or so decent journeys there has been one like this. I'm a regular so I understand how to make my way around these problems but many people, American tourists for example, do not. It can be frightening and confusing for such folk and is no advert for the railway.

For nine years I've spent many happy times in Dingwall but it was sobering to watch near empty class 158s trundling past the window at different times of the day. Or not, because so many get cancelled. In that time, all the tenants have left the station, aside from the pub. The booking office is scarcely staffed and the canopy is falling apart and held together with bits of wood crudely bolted on. Where is the local manager to try and do something about this? Perhaps in Glasgow, hundreds of miles away?

There is never any promotion of the Far North or Kyle lines by their owners and operators. Why is no effort made to get even a few of the thousands of passengers on the cruise ships

calling at Invergordon, onto the railway? Why do so many buses between Dingwall and Inverness leave at similar times to the train? Why is it that as soon as there is a weather warning or some other problem, trains just stop running on the Far North and Kyle lines?

Someone, somewhere, will come up with all the reasons. Don't bother, I know what they are. I also know that many could be fixed if somebody actually cared. But it seems they do not.

In conclusion, on Monday and Tuesday 6th and 7th October the train service through Dingwall continued to be extensively disrupted. It didn't matter because most people were using the rather more reliable Stagecoach bus, often electric, which runs at pretty much the same time as the trains. And for many of those passengers, young and old especially, it was free.

You can spend millions on the Far North and Kyle line permanent way but if the daily execution of running the train service continues to be so poor you might as well not bother. It really does feel as if the railway no longer wants to even try. And that is very much a management issue for which no resolution is in sight.

LETTERS TO THE PRESS

A vital part of our campaigning is to write letters to the press and railway magazines. This is how we keep the important issues in the public eye, and in the minds of those who decide where money is to be spent - MSPs and Transport Scotland.

There was a flurry of activity in September...

The Herald - 10 September 2025

[WWW](#)

Mark Smith's article about the success of the Borders Railway in the 10 years since its reopening ("Scotland needs a new rail line to England", *The Herald*, September 6) was cheerful reading. However, as railway campaigners one statement jumps off the page to us: "the line costs £14m to operate each year, but only brings in £7m in revenue". Can we please stop doing this? A railway is a vital part of the infrastructure which enables economic development, better living for residents, and easier access for tourists – not to mention the opportunity to get long-distance freight on rails where it belongs.

No-one quotes cost vs income for roads, hospitals or schools, so why do it for railways?

In the Highlands of Scotland there are already hundreds of miles of railways which could do a wonderful job if only they weren't chronically starved of infrastructure investment. They were built as single-track lines, because in the 19th century the promoters couldn't afford the double track which is needed for a reliable service. The accountant-led government decision-making on rail investment

in the 21st century has led to the Highlands railway deficit, where most of the available money goes to parts of Scotland with greater population density. This ignores the fact that a good railway system benefits the whole country, not just the local users.

Ian Budd - Convener, Friends of the Far North Line

RAIL - 17 September 2025 - Invest in the Far North

I welcome publication about the prospects of the Far North Line.

For the past 20 years, the Friends of the Far North Line have been lobbying to reinstate the Delmore Loop on the 20 miles of single track between Inverness and Beauly, to increase capacity and speed up travel times.

The usual excuse is lack of money, despite the work being promised many times.

Each year that passes increases the cost, so come on Network Rail: dust down the plans and do the job!

HS2 spent £100 million on a bat tunnel. Surely we deserve a fraction of that to be spent on our most scenic and essential line.

Iain Bell, Thurso [FoFNL member]

Press & Journal 28 September 2025

Neil Drysdale hits the nail squarely on the head in his opinion piece on 19 September.

Railway industry readers may well feel that some of his criticisms are unfair, but wait - he is a "non-driver" who has "always loved travelling by rail", not a car owner who doesn't even give rail travel a thought.

Whether accurate, or not, public perception is key to attracting passengers. There is no doubt that for rail travel in the Highlands Mr Drysdale's comments are painfully accurate. At the best of times it is very difficult to interest many politicians in Scotland to look seriously at rail investment. And then politicians love big, headline-catching projects, where the most voters live, so this has left the single-track railway system in the Highlands far behind even the rest of Scotland, let alone Europe.

A missed connection at Inverness is mentioned - ScotRail does try to hold departures when a connecting train is late, but because all the lines are single track a late departure of one train from Inverness has the potential to wreck the whole timetable for the rest of the day while trains coming in the opposite direction wait at one of the rare crossing points, so a judgment call has to be made.

The builders of the original railways back in the 19th century simply didn't have the cash to lay the double track they knew was needed - in the 21st century the cost of railways is rightly shared by society through taxation.

But in the Highlands it seems that railway infrastructure investment is shared in relation to population, which, when you consider that trains are all about moving people from one area to another, is not a clever way to allocate funds.

Our 2026 intake of new MSPs must do better than their predecessors at addressing this, and bring the railway system in the Highlands up to scratch.

Ian Budd - Convener, Friends of the Far North Line

The opinion piece referred to is available to read on this issue's companion page on our website.

NOT IN SCOTLAND

Whilst in Carlisle giving a talk about the Far North Line at the AGM of the Highland Railway Society*, I was handed a booklet produced by Northern entitled *Guide to Train Services - Coast, Lakes, Dales and Fells*.

In a convenient 10cm x 21cm format this 124-page booklet contains an enormous amount of information, including all the train timetables, quite a few bus services, ticket prices, information about Lakes cruises, and train and bus maps.

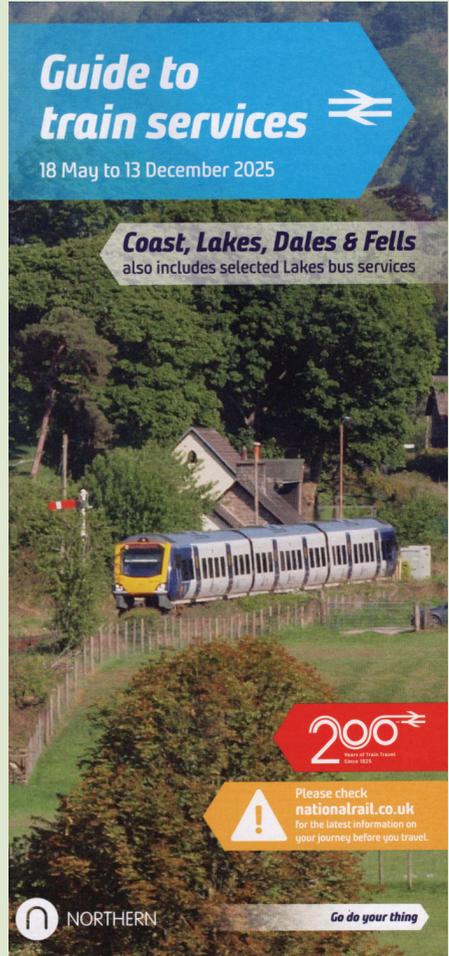
It is ideal for anyone wanting to browse options in the area when on holiday. Especially useful are the train timetables which show connections from other services, such as from London and Glasgow.

In recent times ScotRail has abandoned all printed timetables in favour of the website and mobile phone app. Both these work really well if you already know exactly where you are going and at what time. If you just want to look at what's available, e.g. in my case journeys from Bishopbriggs to the FNL, it's hard work, because the North Highlands timetable doesn't show connections from the south into Inverness, and the Central Scotland timetable doesn't show onward connections from Stirling. To plan your journey your only options are to own a smartphone and use the app by putting in varying times of day, or to have all three timetables from the ScotRail website open in separate tabs or windows on your computer.

Anyone who remembers British Rail's full timetable book will know just how easy journey planning was before home computers and smartphones appeared. Northern's publication is reminiscent of those days and makes planning a journey, or looking for inspiration for a day out, a delight. If only ScotRail were to produce something similar...

Sadly ScotRail's view is that this is simply unaffordable, especially as online publication means that timetable changes more frequent than twice a year can easily be shown with no extra cost, since IT staff are already employed. Unfortunately, this is a significant reduction in customer service.

I.B.



**If you have an interest in the history of the Far North Line, and the Highland Railway in general it is absolutely worth joining the Highland Railway Society. You'll receive a wonderful magazine four times a year, reduced prices on the excellent HRS books, and access to an enormous amount of knowledge. Annual membership is £18.00. <https://hrsoc.org.uk/>*



ARDGAY ACCESSIBILITY

In May Colin Alston and I had a meeting with Network Rail and discussed, among other things, what to do about the three stations on the Far North Line (Ardgay, Lairg and Helmsdale) which have step-free access to only one of the two platforms.

Our suggestion is the installation of 'barrow crossings', which we now know are referred to as 'footpath crossings' by NR, as exist at Tulloch, Glenfinnan, Arisaig, Taynult, and Dalmally on the West Highland Line.

These would involve using the sloping platform ends to access the crossing. Understandably, NR prefers to have no 'level crossings', but the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), which is responsible for the safety rules NR follows, is relaxed about their necessity in some situations where an alternative would be impractical, or the cost prohibitive.

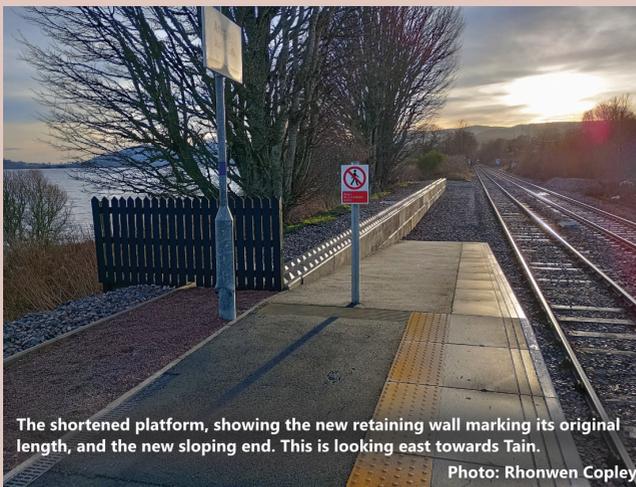
We made the case that at these three stations the trains are limited to 15 mph on entry to the passing loops. A Freedom of Information Request furnished us with the knowledge that there have not been any safety incidents at Scottish footpath crossings in the last five years, in spite of an estimated 60,000 uses per year, of which around 7,800 are by schoolchildren.

ScotRail and Network Rail both have a policy of stations being accessible to all, so there is agreement about the need to address the issue at the three stations.

Since the meeting, NR has been investigating possible solutions, and we are optimistic that provision for disabled passengers will be made in due course. This will be good news too for parents with small children in buggies, cyclists and those carrying heavy luggage. Negotiating footbridges, especially in wet/icy conditions, can be quite a challenge.

Meanwhile, we heard in August that NR was about to embark on major platform renewal at Ardgay, and we were surprised to learn that the shortening of Platform 1 involved termination with steps for railway staff and no sloping section, as would be required for a footpath crossing.

Representations were made by FoFNL, some local residents, and councillors, so a sloping platform end has now been provided. We plan to meet with NR in the New Year to learn what progress has been made with step-free access.



The shortened platform, showing the new retaining wall marking its original length, and the new sloping end. This is looking east towards Tain.

Photo: Rhonwen Copley

Once the work, which included installing tactile paving as well as shortening the platform, was completed, NR issued a press release in which we were glad to see that Phil Campbell, ScotRail's Customer Operations Director, clearly had this in mind, "ScotRail is committed to making Scotland's Railway **accessible for all**, and these upgrades will help deliver safer, easier, and more comfortable journeys for local people and visitors alike."

I.B.

CONON BRIDGE

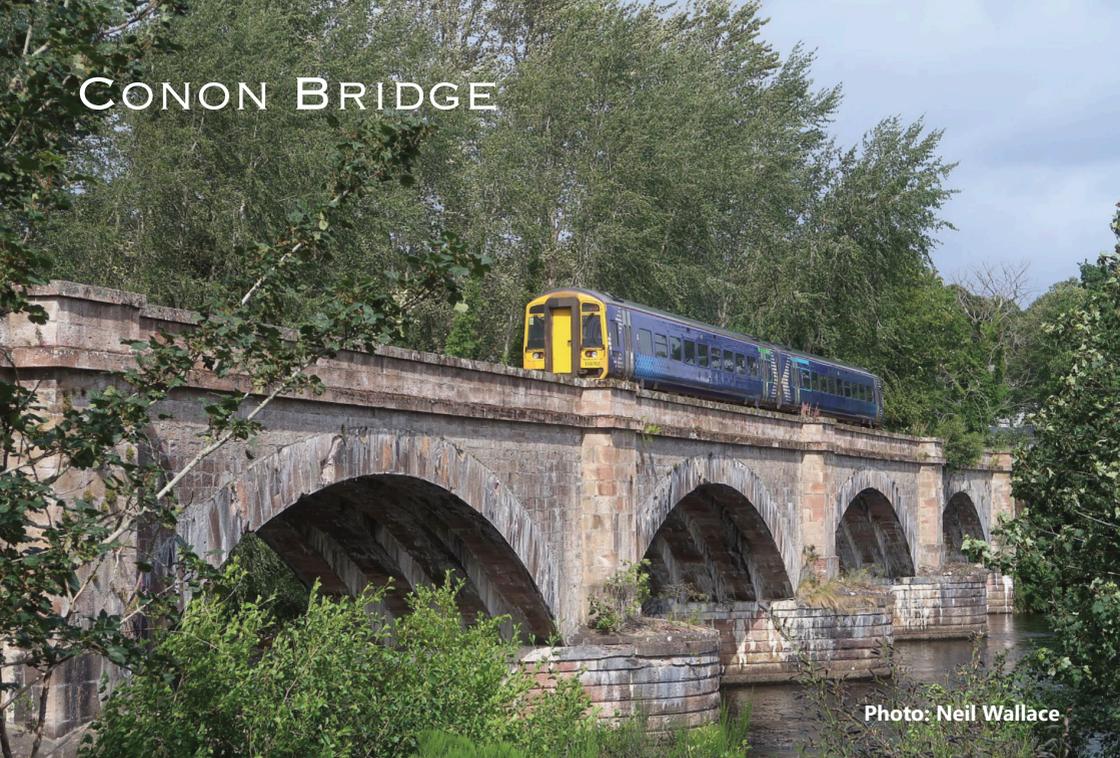


Photo: Neil Wallace

www

This handsome bridge, constructed for the opening of the Inverness & Ross-shire Railway in 1862, designed by Joseph Mitchell and built by Deakin & Co, has inspired a new inn sign at the Conon Hotel.

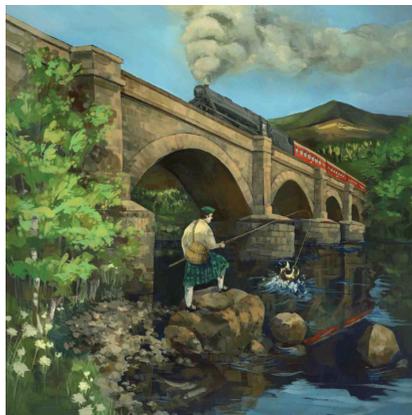
The painting was commissioned by the hotel's new owner, David Whiteford (not of NC500 fame) from the artist Owen Bushell, of R.G. Bushell of Banchory, who also fabricated the sign.

David tells us that the fisherman seen in the painting represents his

grandfather, who often fished in the Highlands and is wearing his Ancient Campbell tartan.

Ben Wyvis is visible in the background, but this is artistic licence as it can't really be seen at this point!

The hotel, built as a coaching inn in 1780, was reopened in 2022, having been rescued from a state of disrepair and dilapidation. It is already famous for its welcome, its food and its comfortable rooms.



I.B.

RAILWAY RESCUE

This heart-warming story came to light in a recent conversation I had last year with my local historian, Carol Primrose.

In this momentous year for railways I'm reminded of some family connections with the Caledonian Railway. Some time in the later years of the nineteenth century, Mitchell Suttie left his home in Inverness to come to Springburn and get employment as a coachbuilder with the Caledonian Railway Company. In the fullness of time his daughter, Jennie, met and married Willie Primrose who was a book-keeper with the Caledonian Railway based at St Rollox in Springburn. (Much later I married their son, also William Primrose.) Because of the family connection with Inverness, they very often holidayed in Fortrose and enjoyed day-trips on the railway. On one memorable occasion before WWII they boarded a train at Fortrose which eventually took them to Kyle of Lochalsh. They spent the day there but it wasn't very enjoyable because the weather was terrible, rained all the time. So, they called it a day in the late afternoon and set off for home. Unfortunately, the train came to a halt before they reached the Black Isle because of a landslip which blocked the line. Well, the railway company determined to get them home and eventually there appeared on the other side of the

landslip, a tender engine, a carriage and a guard's van, complete with driver and guard. The little family climbed in and were duly deposited in Station Square in Fortrose late that night. The station master had stayed up to greet them and collect their tickets. That was when Willie Primrose produced his first class pass as a fairly senior employee of the LMS. So this wonderful service was actually provided completely free.

Carol Primrose

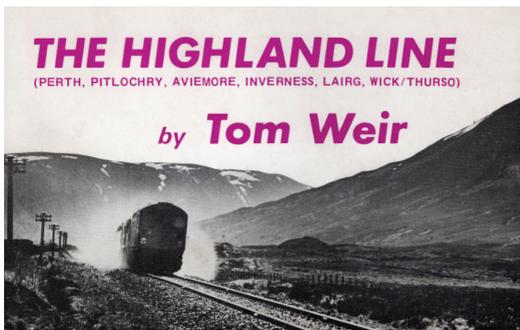


Highland Railway 'Small Ben' No1 *Ben-y-Gloe*, which was built in Glasgow, seen at Fortrose on 14 June 1947 as LMS 14397.

[Photo: W A M Camwell. From the collection of the Highland Railway Society]

WWW

Carol also gave me a signed copy of a wonderful, pocket-sized book by Tom Weir, the well-known Springburn-born writer, broadcaster and mountain climber. Published in 1974 to mark the centenary of the completion of the Highland Railway route to Caithness, this is a line guide intended to be used on a train journey from Perth to Thurso/Wick. Each double page contains a photograph and some descriptive text.



This is such an interesting snapshot of the Far North Line in 1974 that we've put a pdf copy of the second part of the book, covering the FNL, on our website.

Ian Budd

21

[Back to Contents...](#)

FAR NORTH LINE FAME

In September last year, as part of the BBC's coverage of the celebration of 200 years of British locomotive-hauled passenger railways, it published a web page entitled "Nine of the world's most unforgettable train trips". We were delighted to see that the Far North Line was one of the nine, the only mainland British railway on the list (the Snaefell Mountain Railway on the Isle of Man was there too). This screenshot shows how inviting the line is, although the caption is quite misleading!



Scotland's Far North Line rolls through the highlands past one of the country's Unesco heritage sites (Credit: Alamy)

Our line can often seem overshadowed by the West Highland and Kyle Line's obvious scenic beauty, but this puts the FNL where it should be - right at the forefront of tourists' minds when planning to visit Scotland.

One of the best ticket options available in Scotland is the **Spirit of Scotland Travel Pass**. This gives the traveller four days unlimited travel in an eight day period for £155, or eight days unlimited travel in a fifteen day period for £196.



Spirit of Scotland Travel Pass

Unfortunately, in spite of the permanent removal of peak fares last September, ScotRail has decided that it needs to retain the weekday restriction that journeys may not begin until after 09:15. On our enquiry about this we were told that SR is concerned that if they were to remove the restriction commuters would be crowded out by tourists. This really does seem pretty unlikely, especially on the scenic routes, but we have to assume that their research shows otherwise.

Looking at what this means, see the table below for the first available service, one can't help thinking that potential purchasers might be put off by having to lose half a day in many cases - or worse, ticket purchasers may not have noticed the restrictions and would be far from happy. It does look as though ScotRail has not really thought this through. It's not too late for a change of mind...

I.B.

| | | | |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| INV-WCK 10:41 | WCK-INV 12:34 | GLQ-MLG 12:22 | MLG-GLQ 10:09 |
| INV-KYL 10:56 | KYL-INV 12:06 | GLQ-OBN 10:36 | OBN-GLQ 12:11 |

CALLING PHOTOGRAPHERS

We are in the midst of an exciting project:

Over the years we've published many excellent photos in *Far North Express* and we assembled a fine selection of those for our Far North Line 150th anniversary exhibition in 2024. These photos have inspired us to make a more permanent collection in the form of a hardback book. We've come up with an idea to produce a pictorial record of how the look of the line, its trains, and its infrastructure, has changed since around 1960. We are working with one of our members, Mike Wedgewood, who is an experienced author of books of the kind we're planning.

The combination of wonderful scenery, railway infrastructure and the wide range of motive power and trains on the Far North Line is what we wish to convey in the book.

The aim would be to get pre-RETB (c.1985) pictures of all the locations on the line with passing loops, including those that no longer have them, e.g. Fearn. And including freight facilities e.g. Invergordon, Wick, etc. We're particularly keen to find good sources of pre-RETB pictures of trains alongside the many signal cabins and semaphore signals along the route. Scenic pictures away from stations are very welcome too, taken any time from around 1960 to the present, but we are unlikely to use pictures with no trains, or train pictures with no



Photo: Mike Wedgewood

identifiable location, unless they have exceptional content.

The book is intended to be a pictorial album of the diesel era, from around 1960 onwards, showing a 'definitive' photographic journey along the line, with trains at as many points of interest along the line as possible, illustrating how the railway environment has changed over the years, with 'then and now' pictures where relevant.

For the purposes of publication, the photos need to be of good quality in terms of focus and sharpness and resolution.

If you have suitable photographs yourself, or know of any collections which may contain photos we could use, please get in touch using the editor@fofnl.org.uk address.

I.B.



Photo: Martin Loader

27 years separate these photos taken at Thurso in 1979 and 2006

23

[Back to Contents...](#)

TITLED STEAM ENTHUSIASTS

Inventions and Inventors

I'm hoping that FoFNL members, and other readers will forgive this excursion into a bit of history with a somewhat tenuous connection to the Far North Line.

Everyone with an interest in the line will be very familiar with the 3rd Duke of Sutherland. They may however be less familiar with James Sinclair, the 14th Earl of Caithness. Sinclair, who lived in Barrogill Castle (now the Castle of Mey) was a renowned scientist, politician and inventor and the first project of his that we're going to cover was nothing whatsoever to do with railways.

Not that the Earl had no interest in railways - far from it - he was a familiar figure in their promotion, being chairman of the Caithness Railway which was responsible for the original Act of Parliament for a railway linking Thurso and Wick. He was later a director of the Sutherland and Caithness Railway Company, of which the Duke was chairman.

Both the Duke and the Earl kept themselves up to date with the rapid pace of technological developments in the 19th century, so it's not surprising to learn that they both had an enthusiastic interest in the first invention we'll visit.

Before embarking on our story we need to cover a little bit of steam locomotion history. In 1765 the French engineer, Nicolas-Joseph Cugnot, began work on a steam-powered vehicle for the French Army to haul heavy items such as cannons. The first ever self-propelled vehicle was the result, with a small version initially in 1769, followed by a full-size working machine in 1770, which can be seen in the Musée des Arts et Métiers in Paris.

Although this venture proved unsuccessful the idea was 'out there', and some years later William Murdoch, a Scottish engineer working in Cornwall, built a three-wheeled model steam locomotive about one foot high which was witnessed in 1784 running around his living room! Some years later Murdoch and Richard Trevithick (who went on to produce the world's first working steam railway locomotive in 1804) became next-door neighbours, and Trevithick was inspired by Murdoch's models.



A similar model made by Murdoch in 1786
Birmingham Museums Trust ©CC BY-SA 4.0

From then, until the end of the 1830s, several engineers and inventors made steam-powered road vehicles for industrial and agricultural use. However, interest in further development seems to have waned and the next burst of activity was by the English engineer, Thomas Rickett. In 1856 he was working at a foundry in Buckingham, and in 1858 he built a traction engine, a steam plough, and a steam-powered "carriage" - and this is our link...

Our Duke of Sutherland was also the Earl of Stafford, and always had a keen interest in the use of the latest engineering achievements, his obituary stating that "He did more than, perhaps, any other man in the world to utilise cultivation by steam". When he discovered Rickett's 'steam carriage' he decided to buy it, becoming the first person in the world to buy an 'automobile'.

Rickett carried on developing his design and built a second steam carriage for the Earl of Caithness. In January 1860 this machine was driven from Buckingham to Windsor for inspection by Queen Victoria and her family. This successful run was described in the 11 February issue of *Illustrated London News*.

Then came an epic journey, described in the 15 September 1860 edition of the same journal...

Some time back we gave an illustration of a steam-carriage which was driven from Buckingham to Windsor Castle. The accompanying Engraving represents a similar one, built for the Earl of Caithness, with which his Lordship, accompanied by Lady Caithness, the Rev. W. Ross, and Mr. Rickett, "travelled north;" in fact, drove from Inverness to Barrogell Castle, a distance of 150 miles, virtually in two days, and which is considered the boldest and most difficult enterprise recorded in the annals of road locomotion. A trial trip to a point 150 miles ahead, with a full load of passengers and luggage, over some of the most mountainous districts of Scotland, the party for the most part unacquainted with the route, and the supplies of coal and water therefore uncertain; sometimes ascending hills of 1 in 7, towering up to a splendid sea view, and again descending the winding roads cut in the hill sides, crossing the mountain gorges at an acute angle by a narrow bridge, down an unprotected gallery of rocks, without the slightest accident or danger, certainly speaks well for the noble conductor, and also for the inventor of the carriage. It is stated that his Lordship travelled the first stage from Inverness to Beaully, a distance of fourteen miles, in one hour and twenty minutes, notwithstanding frequent stoppages for horses and once for water. After leaving Beaully, on those parts of the road where some distance forward could be seen, he attained a speed of eighteen miles an hour, and could have kept it up for any distance with ease and safety. He drove up the hills without difficulty, and, proceeding down the very steep declivity near where the road joins the other from Tain, the control his Lordship had over it was most satisfactory, and enabled him to descend at any rate he pleased with perfect ease and safety.



Earl of Caithness with Lady Caithness and Rev.W.Ross - Thomas Rickett, 'boiler man' at rear. Photo: National Motor Museum

On the Monday he started from Golspie at an early hour, numbers assembling to see if it would manage the steep ascent leading to Dunrobin Castle; but, as usual, drove right on, amidst hearty cheers, to the town of Helmsdale, about fifteen miles, when, on stopping for water, egress from the carriage was almost impossible from the crowd of Gaelic fishermen assembled. The town is situated at the foot of "the Ord of Caithness," a noted mountain, which, it was said, would bring the engine to a stand if anything could; and oft was the cry repeated, "Ye'll ne'er get o'er the Ord!" The ascent commences immediately on leaving the town with an incline of

about 1 in 10, and continues for five miles frequently 1 in 7. Winding up the precipitous route, the deep, strong, but regular beat of the engine told that, though severely taxed, the task was not more than it could manage, and without once stopping or flagging it reached the summit, when the party congratulated themselves on the crisis of the enterprise being so satisfactorily passed. For the descent into Berridale Glen his Lordship had provided a special drag, but found that; with the party walking down, the ordinary screw-brakes were quite sufficient to keep it perfectly under control.

At Wick, about seventeen miles from his Lordship's residence, the arrival of the carriage was anxiously expected. Horsemen went out to meet it, and the firing of cannon announced its approach. The whole town appeared to have turned out, for the streets were thronged; and, being situated a hundred miles and more from any railway, steam on the highroads was hailed with enthusiasm. His Lordship stopped more than an hour for refreshment, and then, amid the gathering shades of night, drove on to Barrogell; but the nights are not dark in that treeless county, and his Lordship drove as merrily as by daylight to within a few miles of John o' Groats.

These carriages are designed by Mr. Rickett to carry three persons at ten miles per hour on any ordinary roads, which they appear satisfactorily to accomplish. They require about the same space as a horse and chaise, carry sufficient water for ten to fifteen miles, and coal for thirty miles, weigh thirty cwt., and are well mounted on springs, the only noise being that of the escaping steam, which can be stopped instantly when horses appear frightened. The arrangement is such that the carriage and the engine are distinct, and the duties pertaining to each divided. The fireman keeps up the supply of power by attention to the fire and water, while the person occupying the front right-hand seat turns it on as he thinks proper, having absolute control in the use of the steam and in guiding the carriage.

I haven't been able to discover how the vehicle travelled from Windsor Castle to Inverness, but I suspect it went by rail. Recounting his experience the Earl said, "I may state that such a feat as going over the Ord of Caithness has never before been accomplished by steam, as I believe we rose one thousand feet in about five miles. The Ord is one of the largest and steepest hills in Scotland. The turns in the road are very sharp. All this I got over without trouble. There is, I am confident, no difficulty in driving a steam carriage on a common road. It is cheap, and on a level I got as much as nineteen miles an hour."

There was much optimism at this time about the prospect of steam-powered road travel, but in a reversal of present day lobbying, which rail campaigners like ourselves will find entertaining, influential businessmen with rail investments, and the railway companies themselves, saw to it that in 1861 the *Locomotive Act* was passed, limiting the speed of road vehicles to 10 mph in the country and 5 mph in towns; speeds further reduced by the *Locomotives Act* of 1865 to 4 mph and 2 mph respectively, thereby removing road competition from the railway landscape until the *Locomotives on Highways Act* of 1896, which raised the speeds and removed some other restrictions.

Roads in the 1860s were hardly an ideal habitat for heavy steam vehicles anyway, as the *Illustrated London News* pointed out in describing the visit of the Earl's machine to Windsor Castle: "Some idea may be formed of the functional resistance on common roads when it is mentioned that as much power is required to draw one ton on a common road as fifteen to twenty tons on a railroad..." - a comment relevant to today's freight transport, which common sense says should be done by rail where possible.

James Sinclair was credited with bringing "steam" to Caithness - not just his steam carriage, he was the first to use a steam plough in the north of Scotland. Well-known for his inventions he turned to thoughts of railways in the 1870s (inventing a prosthetic leg [1866], and the Caithness Gravitating Compass [1868] on the way) and so we find a report in *The Engineer* magazine, dated 30 April 1875:

On Tuesday morning, last week, some private experiments took place near the running sheds of the Great Northern Railway, King's-cross, with some machinery just erected there for cleaning railway carriages by mechanical means, invented by the Earl of Caithness, The invention consists essentially of two large vertical brushes driven by a little steam engine; a number of dirty carriages making up a train of any length is passed slowly between these revolving brushes; water is thrown upon the side of each railway carriage, 2ft. in advance of the brush, from a vertical iron pipe pierced with small holes, placed at an average distance of 8in. from each other, A second water-pipe, pierced with similar holes, directs another series of small jets of water directly upon the brushes, The whole arrangement is not very dissimilar in principle to that of hair brushing by machinery.

This invention was made and patented by Lord Caithness towards the end of last year, when after fitting up and trying a small revolving brush in one of the carriage repairing sheds at King's-cross, he resolved to order the construction of a machine for actual use. While this was in course of manufacture he left England on a prolonged visit to the United States of America, and a week or two since returned, bringing with him an exceedingly efficient and well-made stationary engine of 4-horse power, manufactured by the Baxter Steam Engine Company, at Colts fire-arms manufactory. This little engine, which is very popular in America, is used to drive the brushes at King's-cross.

In the experiments last week a dirty train of twelve carriages of different sizes was passed between

the brushes. The time occupied in so doing was four minutes and a-quarter, and although this was the first experiment tried with the completed apparatus, the results were gratifying. During those four minutes it became evident to the observers that three conditions at least affected the results, The chief of these was the velocity with which each carriage was drawn between the brushes by the locomotive, those which were passed most rapidly being less perfectly cleansed than those drawn more slowly. Another condition was the amount of pressure of the brushes against the sides of the carriage, which pressure was completely under the control of the man who used the apparatus. A third condition was the distance between the holes in the vertical pipes, which projected the water upon the sides of the carriages. The motion of the train as the small jets of water played upon it caused the jets to describe parallel lines upon the sides of the carriages, and when the motion was too swift, and the brushes themselves not quite saturated with water, small portions of the carriages were liable to pass without being wetted, These and other little points were noted before the train had passed half-way through the brushes on its first trial; the speed of the train and the pressure of the brushes were then so regulated that the last half of the train passed as perfectly washed as could be desired. Before the train passed between the brushes it was palpably dirty, and after it came out it was palpably well cleaned, windows and all.

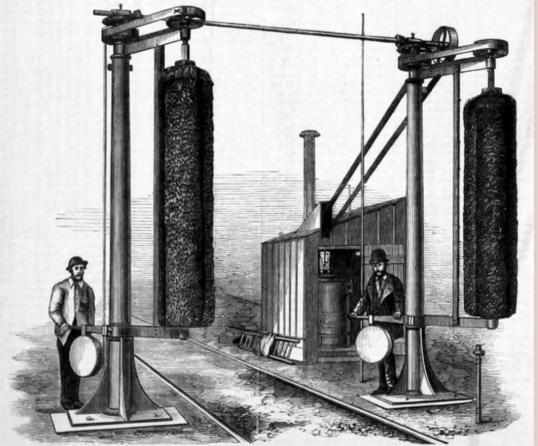
The machine tried last week is shown in the accompanying engraving. The lever arms, by means of which the man presses the brushes against the sides of the carriages, were found to be a little too short, the consequence being that he had not a convenient amount of leverage to produce the requisite pressure without undue exertion; the shortness of the handles also kept him within reach of the spray from the brushes, from which spray he was protected by means of a waterproof dress. The brushes are to be covered by a screen. Had the handles been a little longer, as they will be on the next occasion, he would be almost entirely out of the spray. The velocity with which the brushes were driven was somewhat slow, so that they did not discharge any spray worth mentioning, except for a yard or two in the direction of the end of the train, just over the place where the man was applying the pressure by means of the lever. The other spectators were not in any way inconvenienced by the spray, nor was it necessary to put up the protecting "shield" which is included in the patent. The quantity of water consumed in washing the train was surprisingly small, and probably less than would have been consumed by the ordinary method of dashing water from buckets against the sides of the carriages before applying hand brushes.

The train used last week consisted of dirty carriages, which looked as if they had been standing uncleaned for a great length of time, but there were no splashes of dried mud to be rubbed off their sides. Experiments have yet to be tried with muddy trains. So far as could be seen from the trial of last week there are no difficulties in cleaning railway trains by the method now under notice, which cannot be overcome by experience and by practice. At all events, a train was well cleaned at the sides after passing twice through the brushes, the time occupied being four and a-quarter minutes each passage, or eight and a-half minutes altogether.

Lord Caithness says, "I am told it takes a man twenty-five minutes to clean one carriage by hand."

The Earl seems inadvertently also to have invented the car wash we use today!

CARRIAGE WASHING APPARATUS, GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY.

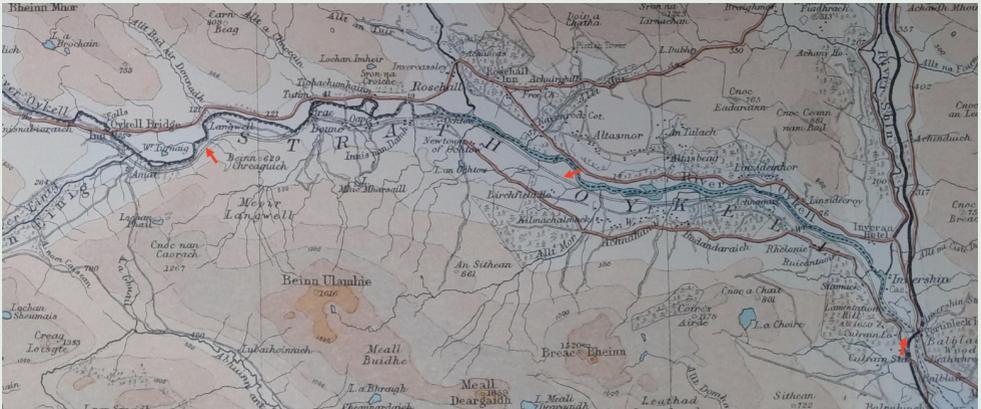


THE LOCHINVER RAILWAY : PART I

'Few Engineering Difficulties' - Andy Drummond

www

In the sumptuous *Atlas of Scotland*, printed in 1895 by Bartholomew's of Edinburgh for the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, two adjacent maps show a sinuous double-line faintly snaking its way across the north of Scotland. It begins at Culrain, on the Far North Line, then heads west up the glen of the Oykell River, largely following the coach-road (the present A837) as far as the hamlet of Ledmore. Here it heads off due west into the wilderness, along the north shore of Loch Veyatie,



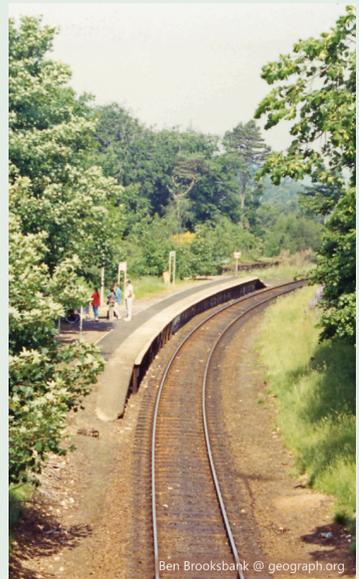
Map segment from the RSGS Atlas of 1895, showing the line of the railway between Culrain and Oykell Bridge. Courtesy of R.V. Simons

under the precipitous southern slopes of Suilven, then the south shore of Fionn Loch, before emerging by the road at Strathan and terminating at the Culag Hotel in Lochinver. The atlas itself does not give any clue as to what this line might represent. Anything less than a scrutinising glance might miss it.

In fact, this ghostly line is all that remains of the proposed railway that was to run between Culrain and Lochinver.

In the early 1890s, there was something of a feeding frenzy to get railways built in north-west Scotland. The goal was to transport the infinite supplies of fish from the waters around western Scotland to the huge urban populations down south. Such a desire was partly fuelled by the Napier Report (1884), which recommended that new transport links be established for the west coast of Scotland, both on sea and on land. This is not the place to delve deeply into all the proposed schemes which emerged: suffice to say that there were six, from the Fort William to Mallaig extension in the south, to a Lairg to Laxford branch line in the north, all vying for the attention of both the Westminster government and the doubtful benevolence of the Highland Railway Company.

In the best traditions of civil service and governmental



Culrain Station, from where the Lochinver line would branch off the FNL (1986)

bureaucracy, various Secretaries for Scotland arranged for respectable gentlemen to be sent out into the wilds to determine the pros and cons of each proposal. In 1890, a commission led by Spencer Walpole set out, visited people and places, and reported back; in 1891, another (this time 'Special') committee under Major-General Hutchinson also set out and reported back; in 1892, a lone under-secretary from the Scottish Office, W.C. Dunbar, set out in their wake and reported back. While these gentlemen were thus occupied, local communities – sometimes with the support of neighbouring estate-owners – busied themselves with letters, petitions, submissions and lobbying, to promote



Map segment from the RSGS Atlas of 1895, showing the line of the railway between Ledmore and Lochinver. Courtesy of R.V. Simons

their own local schemes.

We shall restrict ourselves here to the proposal for the Culrain to Lochinver line.

In the 1890 Walpole report ‘a railway, about 42 miles in length, from Invershin on the Highland Railway to Lochinver’ was discussed. The commission estimated that it would have construction costs of around £260,000. The proposal was not investigated in great detail, but the commissioners arrived at the conclusion that, ‘if only one line [north of Strome Ferry] be financially practicable, Lochinver, lying about midway between Loch Laxford and Loch Broom, should in our opinion have the preference.’ All very positive, and the commission even strayed into forbidden territory by suggesting that construction costs should be subsidised by the government. Which turned out to be wishful thinking.

But since no one in Whitehall could bring themselves to make a decision, a new three-man committee was sent out in 1891, led by Hutchinson, whose report on the “Improvement of Railway Communication on the Western Coast of Scotland” finally appeared in April 1892. Hutchinson did not have much new to say, largely repeating the facts established by Walpole, and agreeing with him that Lochinver ‘affords the most convenient natural site for the establishment of a fishery centre and railway terminus’. But this report also touched on a somewhat fantastic scheme which had already been proposed by locals – to build a railway from Garve to Ullapool, and then to extend it from

Ullapool to Lochinver. 'But,' as Hutchinson astutely observed, 'the country between Ullapool and Lochinver ... is very hilly', and the extension was likely to cost upwards of £420,000. However, the report's authors believed a line from Invershin to Lochinver, could be built, maintained and operated by the Highland Railway Co., just as long as the government chipped in a substantial amount of capital, payable at £7,800 per annum for 25 years. Which also turned out to be wishful thinking. In an upbeat conclusion, the report concluded that 'With a railway terminus ... at Lochinver... we are of opinion that the pressing wants of the districts north of the Island of Skye would be met.'

W.C. Dunbar's 1892 report, on the other hand, although detailed and lengthy, concluded rather disappointingly that neither the Lochinver nor the Laxford lines should be built.

One curiosity of the Culrain-Lochinver line is its route. It is evident from sketch maps produced by the Walpole commission and by W.C. Dunbar that the proposed line would continue north-westwards from Ledmore, through Inchnadamph, along the north shore of Loch Assynt, and enter Lochinver from the north-east. But it is clear that an alternative route was being touted – the one traced on Bartholomew's Atlas. There is a map, stitched together from four separate Ordnance Survey maps and pasted to a cloth backing, held by the National Records of Scotland, and on it the southern route is boldly marked in red ink, with each passing mile carefully marked out. The Hutchinson report of 1892 notes: 'The length of such a line [to Lochinver] would be about 38 or 43 miles, according as its western section is arranged to pass south or north of Loch Assynt and the Suilven hill.' Further evidence appears in a letter written (rather mysteriously from 'Ullapool Harbour') to *The Scotsman* in September 1894; Dr H.H. Little noted that the route would run 'close to the



The Culag Hotel at Lochinver, ca. 1890, proposed terminus of the Lochinver railway. George Washington Wilson - National Galleries of Scotland

present road as far as Elphin, and to Lochinver by way of Loch Fewn' – i.e. Fionn Loch – and 'would present few engineering difficulties'. (Little was headmaster of Loretto School in Edinburgh, and famous for umpiring the first Calcutta Cup rugby match between Scotland and England. Quite why he was promoting the Lochinver railway – as he indeed was with this letter – is uncertain.) His bland

dismissal of any engineering difficulties suggests that he had never seen the landscape around Loch Veyatie.

Thus, a bold, scenic and exciting southern route was being proposed. That otherwise sterling railway historian, H.A. Vallance, skips rather too nonchalantly over this, stating simply that the line 'left the main line at Culrain ... and keeping to the south bank of the River Oyckell, ran by way of Rosehall and Oyckell Bridge to the head waters of the river. Passing over the hills to Aultnacaelgach the Kirkaig River was followed to the west coast, whence the railway turned northwards to terminate at Lochinver...'

In comparison with campaigns for the Garve–Ullapool and Achnasheen–Aultbea lines, led by astonishingly energetic local letter-writers, the Lochinver campaign on the ground was rather low-key.

Mr James Gordon of Lochinver did what he could to organise meetings, raise petitions and write to London, but he seemed to operate on his own. And yet, despite this, in May 1892 the Scottish Secretary Lord Lothian received a deputation in his Whitehall office, comprising eminent persons seeking to promote the Lochinver Railway. Rather surprisingly, it was led by the 3rd Duke of Sutherland; in his wake, an odd group of supporters followed, including Angus Sutherland, one of the Crofters Party MPs, and our Mr Gordon. (It should be noted here that the Duke of Sutherland was busily promoting the Lochinver line against the rival Lairg-Laxford line; the latter's route would take it either through or immediately adjacent to the Duke's own Reay Forest Estate, and he was having none of that.) The group pressed Lochinver's claim for a railway, citing the reports of Walpole and Hutchinson. Lord Lothian listened politely and replied noncommittally ('the Treasury and the Government were quite prepared and quite determined to do something'), and then shooed them out. On the following day, he received a similar deputation advocating the Ullapool Railway: never a dull moment in Whitehall.



Loch Barrolan, east of Ledmore. The railway would run along the shoreline on the right.

The meeting with Lothian was undoubtedly the high point of the Lochinver campaign. Thereafter the proposal faded rapidly, the more so since appropriate Acts of Parliament were shortly passed to build extension railways to Kyle of Lochalsh (1893) and to Mallaig (1894).

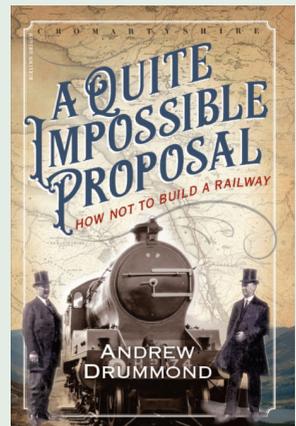
But Lochinver was not done yet. Not by a long way.

Andy Drummond

A Quite Impossible Proposal Andrew Drummond. Birlinn, 2020.

ISBN 978-1-912476-88-6. 274pp. **£20.00**

The Lochinver railway is mentioned fairly briefly in Andy Drummond's excellent book about attempts and plans to build railways to north-west Scotland. For all with an interest in how the history of the area explains the present this book is essential reading. *A Quite Impossible Proposal* is easy to find on the Waterstones website, on Amazon, and direct from the publisher: <https://birlinn.co.uk/product/a-quite-impossible-proposal-2/>.



DUNROBIN UPDATE

In October Paul Jarman, Director of Development - Transport, Industry & Design at the Beamish Museum, where Dunrobin is destined to live, published a detailed update on progress with its restoration, which is being undertaken in the Severn Valley Railway workshops.

I thought that an update on progress with the restoration of *Dunrobin* was timely, with the locomotive having had its hydraulic boiler test this week, and progress made on other fronts too.

1: The valve gear/motion has now all been overhauled and installed. Bear in mind that the sidebars, pistons and valves had not previously been used with this (new) cylinder block, so a great deal of time and care has been taken in setting up and aligning these components.

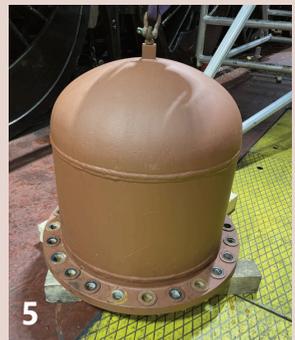


2 & 3: Since we last saw this view, the connecting rods have now been fitted (these transmit the power from the piston rod/cylinder, to the wheels via the crank axle on this locomotive).

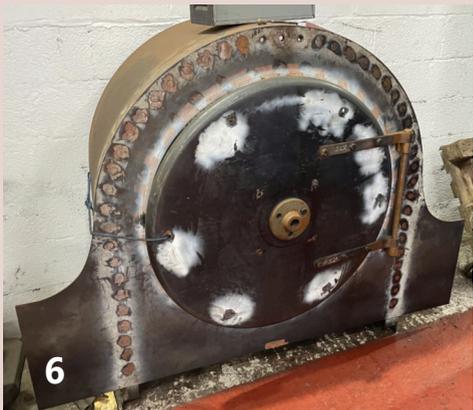


4: A close-up view of the sidebars, crosshead and valve rods, all finally assembled onto the locomotive.

has been fabricated by a sub-contractor and tested. This component is hidden by the original dome cover, which is ready to be refitted when the time comes.



6: The new smokebox with door in place. This will be attached to the



boiler in due course. There is a great deal of new metal in this locomotive!

7: Two components of the new gauge glass

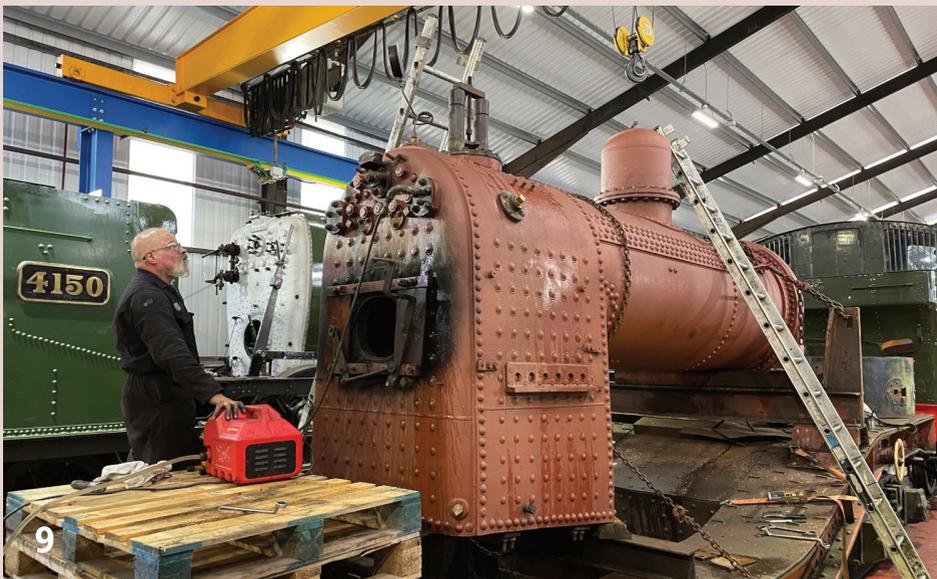


fittings. The originals were all intact, but had been modified in Canada, and so the whole suite of top/ bottom glasses, flanges and drain cocks are being replaced.

8: New (left) and old (right). These are bottom fittings, the top ones having a curved flange mounts to fit the radius of the firebox back head corner.



9: The completed boiler is filled with water and then the electric compressor pumps it up to working pressure, and then an additional third. This being a total of 200psi on *Dunrobin* (which has a copper firebox).





10: The gauge, showing the pressure – this was then observed by the insurance company boiler inspector, who was looking for any decline in pressure across a 30 minute period. With little discernible drop, the test was considered successful and the boiler will now be prepared for steam testing. This will probably entail placing it into the frames as a convenient location for the assembly of back head fittings to be carried out, but it will be in and out of the frames several more times before it is finally placed ready for service.



11 & 12: A quick stocktake was also carried out, as some items will come back to Beamish for overhaul in order to help progress the restoration. An example of this is the passenger seat in the cab. This will be repaired and re-covered (the original plan shows it was buttoned, so it will probably end up in dark green leathercloth). The green paint on the back of the seat backrest supports may well be original, so this is to be conserved and retained.



13: One of the three boxes that were fitted to the underside of Dunrobin, and which contained picnic hampers (and were kept cool in these locations) to provide refreshment to footplate guests and those in the saloons alike.

As ever, we won't speculate on a completion date for the project, though this has been much-discussed with the contractor. It is very pleasing to reach this milestone, and see so many components now ready to be attached to the locomotive as the project moves into its final phases.

Photos: **Paul Jarman**



Although no date is yet known for Dunrobin's return to steam, it will be wonderful to see the locomotive reunited with the smaller of the Duke's private carriages, which has already been fully restored at Beamish. His other carriage is currently on display in the Museum of Scottish Railways in Boness.

I.B.

FNL IN THE MUSEUM

[www](#)

On a recent visit to the excellent **Museum of Scottish Railways** at Bo'ness, I decided to try to find all the Far North Line exhibits. I'm pleased to say that the line is very well represented, from small items, such as carriage and platform destination boards, to the Duke of Sutherland's large private coach.



[Above left] Fortrose, Kyle and Helmsdale station destination boards c1900, along with a Tain/Inverness reversible carriage destination board from the 1950s.

[Above right] Muir of Ord station sign and two station destination boards from Inverness.

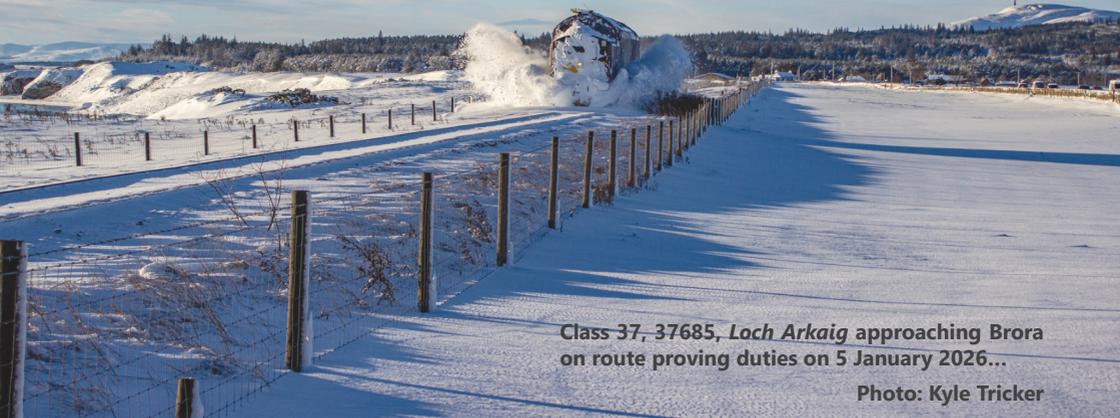
[Centre right] Lever frame from Rogart South signalbox (which is now happily ensconced in Frank Roach's garden at Rogart!). Visitors are invited to try out the interlocking.

[Below] The Duke of Sutherland's large carriage, which was used as a prototype for the Royal Train. It is fully restored inside, complete with 'occupants'.

I.B.



FROZEN!



Class 37, 37685, *Loch Arkaig* approaching Brora on route proving duties on 5 January 2026...

Photo: Kyle Tricker

...arriving at Wick later that day.

Photo: Leon Gray

