

FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

WINDOW GAZER'S GUIDE

The Friends of the Far North Line group was involved with the specification for refurbishing the Inverness allocation of Class 158 trains in 2007 which created more bike and luggage space. All the comfortable new Grammer seats were aligned with the windows, an essential for a scenic railway.



Photo: Richard Ardern

Leaving Inverness station, the train is soon on the new Ness Viaduct (which replaces the one swept away in 1989) over the river at the inward end of the harbour. There might be shipping to see or, depending on the state of the tide, the sheer rush of water to marvel at. The Beaully Firth is reached just before the Caledonian Canal swing bridge at Clachnaharry Lock which the train clunks over at 10 mph.

Once the former fishing village of Clachnaharry is passed, the view opens up to the head of the Firth with Ben Wyvis dominant in the background beyond the Black Isle peninsula. A passing loop to relieve this busy stretch of line is to be built here and will be known as the Delmore Loop. The sea sometimes freezes as far out as the canal sea lock and when the tide is full or the sea pastel blue, this is one of the most inspiring views on the line. Passengers should sit on the right hand (coastal) side of the train. Further along near Lentrane is a great place to spot wading birds of all kinds particularly on an incoming tide.

Beaully and Conon Bridge are two of the shortest station platforms in Britain and passengers have to use one of the middle doors. The small addition to the Beaully stationmaster's house used to be Lord Lovat's private waiting room. The golf course approaching Muir of Ord was once the great tryst where cattle from the Highlands were gathered together before being driven south to market. Until 1960, the Muir was the junction for a branch line to Fortrose. Ben Wyvis now dominates the view from the left hand side of the train all the way to Dingwall and it is a good area to spot the red kites reintroduced some 30 years ago. Conon Bridge was reopened in 2013 and but for WWI intervening would have been the junction with a branch for Cromarty.

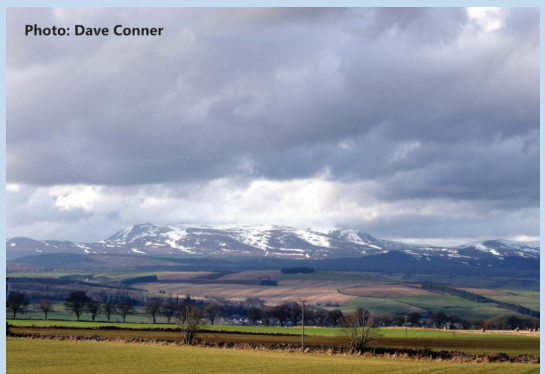


Photo: Dave Conner

Dingwall, the county town of Ross-shire, has a new agricultural mart building with tearoom and exhibition on cattle droving. It used to be a busy station with an engine shed and it is the junction for

the line to Kyle of Lochalsh which heads off to the left. We now travel along the shores of the Cromarty Firth past the Cromarty Causeway which was one of three estuarial crossings which have considerably shortened the A9 road to the north to the detriment of the railway. The Fyrish Monument on top of the hill to the left looks like a collection of Lowry's matchstick men and contrasts with the modern windfarm. Alness is another reopened station famous for its floral displays.

Nearing Invergordon, offshore oil platforms may already have been spotted. Offshore maintenance is a big industry in the Cromarty Firth as is passenger traffic from the biggest cruise liners in the world which use Invergordon's deep water pier regularly throughout the summer. Invergordon is a former naval base (with a mutiny in 1931), and used to have an aluminium smelter but now has a wood pellet manufacturer on the industrial site to the left. To the right we can see the entrance to the Cromarty Firth between the two headlands known as the Sutors. Beneath the North Sutor is the former oil fabrication yard at Nigg now used for ship repair. Rich level farmland extends all the way to Tain.



Photo: Swan-Scot



Photo: Graeme Smith

At Tain we start to travel along the Dornoch Firth with views north along the coast of Sutherland which we will not reach for another hour. The 1991 Dornoch Bridge for the A9 was built so that a railway bridge could be erected alongside, a scheme which British Rail promoted. This fell short by a £4m contribution required from the Scottish Office which was not independent or much involved in railways in those days.

Tain is a former Royal Burgh, a pleasant town with an interesting museum and former terminus of the local train service to Inverness

which ceased when the line was rationalised in 1960. The station buildings have been superbly restored as a restaurant named Platform 1864. Just to the north is the Glenmorangie distillery which has been extended recently and, further on, another at Edderton. Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie's former home, Skibo Castle, is visible across the water between the trees but you have to be quick to see it. Ardgay used to be named for the town of Bonar Bridge at the head of the estuary on the opposite shore. The railway reached this point in October 1864.



Photo: Span Engineering

We are now in Sutherland, and the continuation and completion of the line to

Wick and Thurso took another 10 years and was achieved largely due to the efforts of the Duke of Sutherland. Passing through the attractive wayside station at Culrain we cross the Oykel Viaduct and go through Invershin, another by-request halt. Dominating the view is Carbisdale Castle on a crag on the left. For many years this was a youth hostel, but millions of pounds of repairs needed on the roof brought about its closure. It was built as a flamboyant piece of one-upmanship on the Duke by a Dowager Duchess and is now being renovated at a cost of some £10m.

Up the hill towards Lairg, the scenery changes to open moorland and hill grazing. Lairg Station is two miles above the village and was formerly an interchange point for passengers and mails to places like Tongue and Lochinver on the north and west coasts. The bus connection is now more limited. The line turns south east, over the summit and down the glen through Rogart to Strath Fleet meeting up with the A9 again at The Mound, once a junction for the 1902 light railway to Dornoch which closed in 1960. Loch Fleet is a National Nature Reserve and another good place to watch for bird life, seals and maybe an otter.

Entering Golspie, the line hugs the coast and the train may then stop at the request halt at Dunrobin Castle. This was the seat of the Duke and is open to the public from April to October. The Victorian museum in the gardens is a fascinating period piece and the wooden station building is most attractive and sometimes open as a railway museum. The next stop is Brora where there used to be a woollen mill and earlier a brick works and coal mine which didn't close until the 1970s. This hive of industry created the earliest (wooden) railway in the north in the 1770s between the mine and the harbour.



Photo: Daniel Brittain-Catlin



Dunrobin Castle

The next 15 minutes is one of the highlights of the journey as the line runs along the coastline of sandy beaches giving way eventually to rocky shores. Seals are plentiful, as are rabbits. The extensive views stretch more than 25 miles out to sea past Tarbat Ness lighthouse to the Moray Coast. To the north when nearing Helmsdale the huge 84 turbine offshore wind farm may be seen. It has replaced the three installations of the former Beatrice Oil Field.

The fishing village of Helmsdale has the extensive Timespan Museum which includes material on the 1869 Sutherland Goldrush. The station building is now a self catering unit sleeping up to ten people. The line turns inland along the Strath of Kildonan and is at its most beautiful during May when the yellow gorse and broom are in full flower. The Helmsdale River is renowned for its salmon fishing and red deer are evident most of the year. Kildonan is the nearest station to the gold panning sites. It is a long way to the next passing place, not at Kinbrace, but at Forsinard. Here there is an RSPB reserve with a visitor centre and viewing tower with walks to experience the peaty Flow Country with sphagnum moss, sundew

flowers and rare birds such as the Greenshank. World Heritage status is being sought for this area.

On over the moors past County March Summit we cross in to Caithness and through the remote station of Altnabreac. Looking south we can see the monadnocks of Morven and Ben Alisky sticking up above the peaty and rocky landscape.

Looking north from the late train in the winter there is always the possibility of a display of the Aurora Borealis. Scotscladder station has been nicely restored and then we are soon at Georgemas Junction.

Here the train reverses to travel first down the branch to Thurso. We are back in to farming country with flagstones used vertically as field boundaries. Behind Thurso can be seen the hills of the island of Hoy across the Pentland Firth in Orkney. Those with a keen eye can see the top of the Old Man of Hoy sticking up above the general level of the cliffs. Two miles from Thurso at Scrabster there are sailings to Stromness in Orkney twice a day. Alternatively a bus can be taken to both the Gills Bay and John o Groats sailings to Orkney, passing the Queen Mother's Castle of Mey on the way.



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The train retraces its steps to Georgemas where you will see the new sidings and huge gantry crane used to take low level radioactive waste away from the decommissioned Dounreay nuclear reactors. Another 15 minutes brings us to the end of the line in Wick, a fishing port with a really interesting maritime heritage museum and Nucleus, which combines the local archives and the archives of the entire UK nuclear industry in a stunning award-winning new building.

Wick is 161 miles by rail from Inverness or 174 when you go via Thurso. There is plenty of scope with a rover ticket to break the journey en route and enjoy some of the many attractions. ScotRail is planning to enhance the tourist experience on the line. Watch this space.

Richard Ardern [Revised 2023]

Looking across to Orkney from Thurso Bay

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