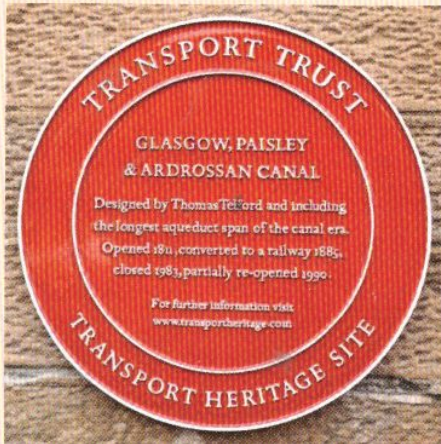


# FOFNL RED WHEEL

**John Yellowlees**, ScotRail Honorary Rail Ambassador and long-time member of FoFNL, suggested that we might wish to fund a Red Wheel plaque at Dunrobin Castle Station to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the opening of the section from Golspie to Helmsdale on 16 May. We happily agreed to this but we do not know, as we go to press, when the unveiling will take place.

John has provided some background information about the history of the Transport Trust and the plaques as well as the *Duke of Sutherland's Railway*.

The Transport Trust was first proposed in 1963 by a Mr R E Wilsdon, who was concerned that records, drawings and photographs from those times of rapid change should be preserved for posterity. He had received support from the British Railways Board, London Transport and others, but there was of course no digital dimension in those days.



The Trust diversified from archiving into skills development, with awards for young preservationists as well as for lifetime achievement, offering loans funded by its benefactors at very low rates of return. Its profile has been maintained by successive patrons the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Michael of Kent and currently the Princess Royal. Now relaunched as the National Transport Trust, its 2020 awards recognised a broad cross-section of transport heritage. Perhaps less successful as yet have been efforts to speak for the heritage community in dealings with organisations like the National Heritage Lottery Fund, but it is hoped that a new manifesto will help achieve improved working

with corporate and affiliated organisations.

Inspired by the English Heritage programme of blue plaques, the Trust's Red Wheels have been rolled out over the last dozen years to denote sites of transport heritage, and work in conjunction with back-up material on its website to inform, educate and enthuse visitors about turning-points in our nation's transport history, so as to help preserve them for the enjoyment of future generations and perhaps inspire youngsters to consider a career in transport or engineering. With over one hundred Red Wheels in place south of the border, Scotland has come late to the game. The first one here was unveiled at Paisley Canal Station in August 2019 to celebrate a site of multiple canal and railway significance. Two days later it was joined by Glenfinnan, and later that year by Wemyss Bay, an ultimate in transport interchange.

Notwithstanding the pandemic, two more were unveiled in socially-distanced fashion during 2020 by Fife farmer and locomotive-owner John Cameron, the Trust's vice-president. These were for Scotland's first railway opened in 1722 at Cockenzie, and the world's first roll-on roll-off ferry in 1850 at Burntisland. Other wheels already delivered for unveiling this year are for the UK's only hand-operated turntable ferry, the *Glenachulish* operating between Glenelg and Kylerhea; Orkney's wartime Churchill Barriers built to keep enemy submarines out of Scapa Flow which now provide a road link between its southern islands; the Alloa Waggonway whose route is etched into the townscape; Madelvic, Britain's first car factory in Granton, Edinburgh which for a short time made early electric vehicles; the Leamington Lift Bridge on the Union Canal in central Edinburgh, and Anderson's Piano, the rockfall detection system of tripwires dating from 1882 in the Pass of Brander, for

which funding has come from the Friends of the West Highland Lines.

What commends the Duke of Sutherland's Railway between Golspie and Helmsdale to the National Transport Trust is that it was the longest stretch of railway anywhere in Britain to have been planned, financed and opened by one individual. Unique among British stations in having been in the ownership of one family throughout its entire existence, the Duke's own station at Dunrobin Castle provides the perfect setting for this Red Wheel funded by the Friends of the Far North Line, and a full account of its significance is on the NTT database: [www.nationaltransporttrust.org.uk/heritage-sites/heritage-detail/dunrobin-castle-station](http://www.nationaltransporttrust.org.uk/heritage-sites/heritage-detail/dunrobin-castle-station).



**John Yellowlees**

National Transport Trust vice-president John Cameron with '1722 Waggonway Heritage Group' chair Ed Bethune in front of the new plaque and a replica wagon. [Photo: John Yellowlees]

## RONNIE MUNRO - CLASSIC RAILWAYMAN

Many in the railway industry in Scotland will have been sad to hear of the passing of **Ronnie Munro** who was latterly Inverness Station Manager and retired in 1994.

He started his career at Tillynaught and was Station Master at Knockando at one time.

David Spaven, who knew Ronnie well and says he can still recollect his accent, mentioned him in his book, *Highland Survivor*.

"Following the successful [peat train] trials [on the Far North Line, in 1987 and 88], with both trains loaded directly from the lineside – the first during the night, and the second in daylight on a Sunday – we developed plans for a weekly train from Scotscaid, making marginal use of otherwise idle locomotives for Sunday loading, and back-loading otherwise empty coal containers from Inverness. Integral to the success of unusual workings such as these was a 'can do' attitude among BR staff and managers, epitomised by the ScotRail Manager at Inverness, Ronnie Munro: a classic railwayman who would get things done, provided you didn't ask too many questions about how he did it..."

Jim Summers, who was Regional Operations Manager, British Rail Scottish Region until his retirement said this:

"Ronnie was a great servant of the railway and its customers. He would use his ingenuity and experience to make things happen, sometimes before Glasgow HQ realised they had. With Ronnie the place was in good hands."

Nigel Wunsch, until 2015 Network Rail's Head of Strategy & Planning, Scotland, commented "He was always very helpful to me when I was a young Traffic Manager in Elgin and later in Inverness (I followed him into that role when he became relief Manager."

**Ian Budd**

## THE OPENING OF THE DUKE OF SUTHERLAND'S RAILWAY

– as recorded by the contemporary press



Extract from the *John O'Groat Journal*,  
22nd September 1870

This year we celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the full opening of the Duke of Sutherland's railway and its connection with the rest of the national network which took place on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1871 – a partial opening had occurred in September 1870. This section of the Far North Line ran through the Duke's estate between Golspie and Helmsdale. The Line is unique in being the only one of such a length financed by a single individual.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke (1828 – 1892) was passionate about the latest technologies, especially railways. In his younger days he elected to work for a season in the railway works at Wolverton<sup>1</sup> where he gained a good grounding in practical engineering.

So it was, when the inaugural train ran between Dunrobin and West Helmsdale on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1870, the Duke was the engine driver. The *Glasgow Daily Herald* of 21<sup>st</sup> September describes the arrival at West Helmsdale shown in the photo: **The Duke's new engine was a sight in itself, being most artistically and beautifully decorated with flowers and evergreens besides being itself a masterpiece of engineering skill. His**

### OPENING OF THE SUTHERLAND RAILWAY TO HELMSDALE BY THE PRINCE AND PRINCESS CHRISTIAN.

MEMORIAL TREES PLANTED BY THEIR ROYAL HIGHNESSES.

An event of no ordinary importance and interest took place at Helmsdale on Saturday last. On Thursday it was made known that his Grace the Duke of Sutherland, accompanied by the Prince and Princess Christian, were to inaugurate the opening of the Sutherland Extension Railway for goods traffic from Dunrobin to Helmsdale, by bringing an engine and carriage attached over the line to a temporary station a small distance to the west of the village, pending the completion of the embankments leading into it. It was also intimated that the Prince and Princess were to plant a tree each in the close neighbourhood of the permanent station in commemoration of their visit.

Grace, who is a first rate engineer, was at his post on the engine and seated beside him was the Princess<sup>2</sup> and the Duchess.

In the September 2020 edition of *FNE* Daniel Brittain-Catlin wrote a short piece to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this event.

In recognition of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke's contribution to the railway network, he and his descendants

enjoyed the right to attach their private saloon to London-bound trains up to railway nationalisation in 1948 and the privilege of a private platform at Dunrobin until 1965.

A task which was not completed in time for this partial opening was the connection to the existing Sutherlandshire railway at Golspie. The local press gives a glimpse of the difficulties of transporting the Duke's locomotive by road over the two miles between Golspie and Dunrobin in the week before. The task took 12 hours and was achieved only by the good fortune of a Thomson road steamer traction engine, travelling up to 'pavement quarries' at Spittal in Caithness. The Duke persuaded the quarry owner, to 'lend' it to pull the wagon carrying the engine up the incline towards Dunrobin. Even so, the manoeuvre also required well over 50 men with ropes including the shirt-sleeved Duke, his son, and Prince Arthur who was staying at Dunrobin with his older sister Princess Christian.

What had been achieved to allow this opening ceremony? The Sutherland line from Bonar Bridge to Golspie had opened in April 1868. The first sod of the Duke's line had been cut on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1869 at Clynemilton, near Brora. It was a considerable feat to complete the whole 17 mile line including four stations, 19 bridges, fences and stone walls in just over two years. So confident was the Duke of the railway's progress over his estate that construction work progressed for more than a year before the Duke of Sutherland's Railway Act, legalising the works, was passed on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1870.

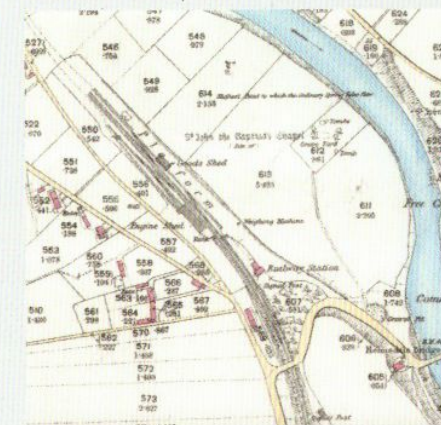
What follows is a flavour of the specification in the Act referencing local properties: **the construction will terminate at or near Helmsdale in the parish of Kildonan and county of Sutherland at or near a point fifty yards or thereabouts southeast of Bual Cottage, occupied by Alexander Bannerman, and in a field or allotment of land at West Helmsdale, occupied by Robert Mackay, situated between the Helmsdale river and the public road leading from Helmsdale to Marril.** What is less clear is how well local crofters were compensated for loss of land and amenities.

The isolated line opened for regular traffic, both passenger and freight on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1870.

Ten days after this start of regular services, *The Inverness Courier* reports that an application was being made to lay a bill before parliament for the final push to Wick and Thurso and . . . to incorporate a company - the Sutherland & Caithness Railway Company. Relevant to this account is the add-on to the Duke's Railway that this Bill included: **A Branch Railway commencing by a junction with the railway first above mentioned at or near Helmsdale station . . . and terminating at or near the seaward extremity of the harbour of Helmsdale . . .**

There were similarly phrased applications for branch railways from the Wick terminus to the new harbour<sup>3</sup> of Pultneytown now in the course of construction . . . ; and from the Thurso terminus to Scrabster harbour

Of course none of these harbour branches were constructed but it is interesting to reflect, if they had been, how they might have affected the fortunes of these ports.



The Ordnance Survey mapped Helmsdale in 1871 just capturing the arrival of the Duke's railway 'in a field'.

On Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> May 1871 the full opening of the Duke's line, with its connection to the railway network at Golspie and the completion of the last cutting through a hard granite ridge just south of the present Helmsdale station, was marked with a grand banquet – or three to be exact!

The scene on the day is described in *The Inverness Courier* 19<sup>th</sup> May 1871:

Tuesday last was a gala day at Golspie and

Helmsdale in honour of the final completion and opening for through traffic of the Duke of Sutherland's Railway. The chief event of the proceedings was the luncheon to the Duke of Sutherland at Helmsdale . . . Early in the day crowds of people were conveyed to the point of attraction by train by coach and all manner of wheeled conveyances. The morning broke inauspiciously. A keen north east wind brought occasional sharp showers of hail, but now and again there were bright glimpses of sunshine.

#### Banquet One

From the *John O'Groat Journal* of 18th May:

The major event of the opening ceremony was a banquet, starting at 1.30 pm, in the new engine shed at Helmsdale. The decorations were made under the superintendence of Mr Mitchell, head gardener at Dunrobin . . . from rafters and pillars numerous flags were hung bearing either the Duke's arms or inscriptions suitable to the proceedings of the day such as 'Long Live the Duke', 'Success to the Railway' . . . Covers were laid for 200 but scarcely as many as that number were present.

A speaker at the banquet after the Duke was Captain Tyler<sup>4</sup> the railway inspector for the line. As reported he started his speech by saying: that in attending to his official duties he always liked to combine business with pleasure and when he came north he always experienced greater pleasure than in any other part of the country first and not least

there was the noble Duke's hospitality so noted south as well as north . . . Today such hospitality might be considered inappropriate for an impartial inspector; it may have influenced the praiseworthy report he produced for the Duke's line.

The **second banquet** was for those who had worked on the construction of the line: The workmen employed online were in the afternoon entertained to dinner at Golspie at the Duke's expense. On his return from Helmsdale his Grace visited the dining Hall and made a short speech to the men. His reception was of the most enthusiastic description . . . There were about 400 present who appeared to enjoy themselves exceedingly.

Sadly no photos have emerged of this band of 'mainly Sutherlandshire men'. At the banquet there was regret expressed that the workforce was being disbanded. The work on the Sutherland & Caithness railway did not start immediately; the photo below believed to be of those navvies – possibly some of the same men who work on the Duke's line – is thought to have been taken around 1874 at Helmsdale when the line north was opened.

The **third 'banquet'** was for Helmsdale children, but this was not paid for by the Duke:

The children attending the two schools in the village [Helmsdale] to the number of about 320<sup>5</sup> were in the evening entertained to a sumptuous repast in the engine room. The expense was born by the number of gentlemen in the village. The proceedings



Dating evidence from the locomotive: Identified as No 40 (Keith), a Medium Goods locomotive built in 1864 and here in its original form. Rebuilt in 1885. The number of men standing on the wagons suggests these were construction navvies and not just a maintenance gang.

appeared to be vastly enjoyed by the young folks.

And to end this article, an excerpt from the account of the Duke's speech at the first banquet recalling how the railways had changed forever the expectations of the long distance traveller: a journey overland from the South was a serious undertaking and it may be remembered that the late Duke of Sutherland [formal reference to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke's

father] was wont to refer to the times when he started on his northward route from Trentham [Stoke-on-Trent] with his four black horses and a coachman with a wig and used to be a fortnight or three weeks in performing the journey to Dunrobin, a distance which can now be comfortably traversed in less than 24 hours<sup>6</sup>.

Michael Willmot

<sup>1</sup> Wolverton Works run by the London and Birmingham Railway Company, at the midpoint of their 112-mile route.

<sup>2</sup> Princess Helena: Helena Augusta Victoria was the third daughter and fifth child of Queen Victoria. Victoria's choice of husband for Helena was Prince Christian of Schleswig-Holstein.

<sup>3</sup> The harbour and Pultneytown development (like Helmsdale constructed as a settlement for displaced crofters following the Clearances) was built to Thomas Telford's design in the early years of the nineteenth century. By 1862 over 1100 boats were fishing out of Wick and in the following year the foundation stone of a much larger harbour. 'the new harbour' was laid. The harbour was half built when, in 1873, a storm caused so much damage that the project was then abandoned.

<sup>4</sup> Sir Henry Whatley Tyler (1827 – 1908) was a pioneering British engineer and politician, who contributed to the Great Exhibition of 1851 and whose collections helped found the South Kensington Science Museum. His interests were mainly in railways, where he served as Inspector of Railways and a railway company director but also in water and iron working. He served as a Conservative MP between 1880 and 1892.

<sup>5</sup> The current population of Helmsdale is 850 of whom around 100 are children under 16

<sup>6</sup> Today a departure from Stoke at 10:11 will get you to Golspie at 20:42, a 10½ hour journey

## RAILY MAIL\*

It has been brought to our attention that on the 3rd March the *Daily Mail* found a small space to describe our line, and our southern neighbour, rather well.

After you've winced at the headline, **GREAT SCOT! THESE RAILWAYS ARE BONNIE** you can enjoy these excerpts:

#### Remote possibility: Conquer Britain's Far North Line

There's nothing remotely like this outside Norway. It just goes from Inverness to the top, finishing in Thurso or Wick, on and on through majestic landscape — bleak moors, dramatic lochs, herons, cormorants, seals, pretty villages and lonely halts until you can stand on the coast and look at Orkney, watching the chilly waters of the North Sea fighting the great waves of the Atlantic. You have conquered Britain's most northerly railway. Fabulous.

#### Summit Special: Sensational views on the Highland Main Line

Just spectacular as it goes from Glasgow or Edinburgh straight up the middle to Inverness. Despite its name, the line creeps through the dramatic Pass of Killiecrankie on a single track, but elsewhere it soars on two magnificent mighty viaducts. It swoops past looming mountains, climbs Britain's highest rail summit and rushes across grassy plains past famous distilleries. Splendid way to spend an afternoon.

\*We can do terrible headlines too.