

OBAN LINE REGENERATION and the NATIONAL CONTEXT

By Paul Tetlaw, Transform Scotland

The Beeching era witnessed a savage butchering of rail routes across Britain in the 1960's. Rural Scotland fared better than other rural areas in England and Wales with the survival of the Far North Line, the Kyle Line and the West Highland Lines but Scotland did lose many lines that today would be valuable transport links. Some lines and stations have re-opened and in most cases actual passenger figures have far exceeded projections. Rail passenger use is booming across Britain and Scotland very much mirrors this trend with annual passenger numbers expected to exceed 100million in a few years time. It is interesting to note that total passenger numbers at the top 5 stations in Scotland now exceed those at the top 5 stations in all regions of England and Wales – apart from London.

Whilst the top 5 stations are all in urban Scotland rural rail use is also enjoying a welcome revival – and no more so than on the Oban line. After closure of the Callander route in 1965, Oban was left with only three all-year trains, and with the loss of seasonal enhancements in the 1980s became the worst-served town in Scotland with an earliest arrival at 1130. As such, the train service existed mainly to connect with ferries for Mull, Tiree and other islands and because buses also did so, communities along the route found it of minimal use for local travel since the train ran at the same times as the bus.

Train did at least become more competitive with bus on the introduction of the Highland Railcard offering a 50% discount to local residents, and two stations reopened : Loch Awe in 1985 and three years later Falls of Cruachan which became a summer-only call to serve the nearby visitor centre for the Cruachan Power Station, where entry is free to those arriving by public transport (rail, bus, bicycle or on foot).

From 2005 the Highland Rail Partnership (later absorbed into HITRANS) having achieved agreement to a four-train minimum frequency on other Highland rural routes began pressing for an “Oban Five” enhancement of two extra trains each way between Oban and Glasgow. However events were to better them when Argyll and Bute Council advanced a scheme for secondary pupils at Oban High School to travel by train instead of school bus. This was a “win-win” situation since the Council would save money and the additional trains would be available for use by anyone.

Commencing May 2014, the Oban-Glasgow service was doubled to six trains daily, with an additional teatime service between Oban and Dalmally. The benefits to the community would prove substantial and wide-ranging :

- adults as well as children can now commute from Dalmally, Loch Awe, Taynuilt and Connel Ferry to Oban – and to Glasgow (at least one does!)
- leisure travellers now have a choice of seven trains, four of which are not duplicated by buses. Council tendered bus services are minimal and at Taynuilt, one of the larger settlements on the route, Citylink coaches have only one stop on the A85 at the edge of the village while the station sits in the centre
- people can take the train to go out for a drink and a meal in the evenings
- children need not return on the school train but can stay later at Oban – and can use their passes at weekends and during holidays with the exception of the summer break (the Sunday service has now been enhanced to three trains each way)
- stations have been improved with better lighting, larger waiting shelters at Taynuilt and Dalmally (funded by Argyll and Bute Council) and safer routes for walking and cycling - CCTV has been provided, and all have now been adopted by gardeners
- the range of ferry connections at Oban has been improved, and a missed connection because of a late-running ferry is not so critical.

2014/5 ridership on the West Highland Lines showed a 14% rise on the previous year which was almost entirely attributable to the Oban enhancement, and growth has continued. Initial resistance by some parents has been overcome (the bus service had sometimes been disrupted by accidents on the A85), as have perceived safety issues arising from the 2010 Falls of Cruachan derailment and on the walking routes to stations. Fuller information on footfall is as follows :

School children with Season tickets

Dalmally - 39
Loch Awe - 7
Taynuilt - 65
Connel Ferry - 20

ENTRIES AND EXITS

	1998	2015	% increase
Oban	89,896	170,682	90%
Connel Ferry	3,927	8,564	118%
Taynuilt	6,238	21,968	252%
Loch Awe	1,828	4,752	160%
Dalmally	1,945	8,338	329%
Tyndrum Lower	4,371	5,334	22%
Crianlarich	10,914	16,752	53%

Other indications of the Oban line's good health include:

- the adaptation of the fine station building no longer in railway ownership at Dalmally to house a feltmaking business HeartfeltbyLiz
- the Friends of the West Highland Lines' success in clearing lineside tree growth along Loch Awe (where the station has also benefited) and in Glencruitten to restore scenic views ; and
- the Caledonian Sleeper's reported interest in restoring Oban to its network after the Fort William Sleeper was successfully diverted there during engineering works north of Crianlarich.

These are all good omens for the Oban line's further development over the next few years which should see the arrival of improved rolling-stock to accommodate ScotRail's Scenic Trains offer and the creation of a Community Rail Partnership.

Some fifty years on from the Beeching era there is now a real sense that the railway in Scotland is valued not only for the vital links it provides to our towns and cities but also for the way it serves our rural communities. Whilst many politicians still remain wedded to the idea that further road building will boost the economy of Scotland it is pleasing to note that expansion of our rail network is now very much back on the agenda.

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