

# Highland Main Line Community Rail Partnership

Neil Sinclair

## The Partnership

In September I was asked by the Highland Main Line Community Rail Partnership to give a series of talks on aspects of the history of the Perth to Inverness Railway at different locations along the line. I was impressed by the work that the Partnership undertakes, particularly regarding stations, and felt that Society members should know more about this.

Community Rail Partnerships were first established in England in the 1990s to involve local people in the development and running of their railway. In 2012 the Scottish government decided to establish CRPs in Scotland. The Highland Main Line Community Rail Partnership was launched in November 2015 at an event in Pitlochry attended by John Swinney, the Scottish Deputy First Minister and the local MSP and Phil Verster, the then managing director of the ScotRail Alliance. Funding is provided by ScotRail.

The Partnership covers the eight intermediate stations on the Main Line from Dunkeld & Birnam to Carr Bridge. When it was formed there were already two groups at Pitlochry and Carr Bridge who supported their local stations. They became members of the CRP

Pitlochry in Bloom was established in the 1990s and not only took over responsibility for the floral displays and the sculpture of the porter at their station, but also secured the restoration of the footbridge and fountain. These were completed in time for the 150th anniversary of the line in 2013 and resulted in a National Railway Heritage Award in 2014. Since 2005 Pitlochry, of course, has also had its well-known station bookshop which has now raised over £220,000 for its charities and just received an award from the Scottish Institute of Fundraising in October.

The Friends of Carr Bridge Station were formed in 2007 under the Station Adoption scheme. They have developed the displays of flowers there which are now an extremely attractive feature of Carr Bridge



One of the new tubs at Blair Atholl station provided by the Partnership. (Neil Sinclair)

Highlands and Islands and Tayside and Central Scotland Transport Partnerships). It is consulted by ScotRail on issues such as the new timetable being planned for the line and which services will call at the smaller stations.

The Partnership members are seeking further improvements to the individual stations they are involved with. At Carr Bridge, for example, the aim is to reopen the waiting room.

A logo for the Partnership has been designed by Jules Akel of Dalwhinnie. It features HR 103 steaming through the Grampians surrounded by a garter based on that of the HR crest. This has appeared on the new planting tubs at the stations and also on the plaque for the recently named John Yellowlees room at the Pitlochry station bookshop. John, the former ScotRail External Relations Manager and now its Honorary Rail Ambassador, was instrumental in both the provision of space for the bookshop and the setting up of the HMLCRP.



## The Station Buildings

The main buildings on the eight intermediate stations on the Perth to Inverness route are of pre-1930s design and all have survived, although some are not used for passengers. They include three Category A listed buildings, Dunkeld & Birnam, Pitlochry and Aviemore, and three Category B listed buildings, Newtonmore (which is now a private house), Kingussie and Carr Bridge. Blair Atholl is presumably not listed because one of its wings has been demolished. I would argue that Dalwhinnie has been overlooked in the listing process as it is the last of several stations designed by Joseph Smith, the HR's architect from 1898. He was still in post as the architect and surveyor for the HR section of the LMS when a replacement was needed for the burnt down station at Dalwhinnie in 1928. It should also be added that the Strathspey Railway's Boat of Garten station and Aviemore locomotive shed are listed as Category B.

Dunkeld & Birnam is one of the finest stations of its period in Scotland, but is one whose future raises concern. Part of the building is used by Network Rail for storage, but the other part is empty. Society members who attended the talks to mark the 150th anniversary of the Perth and Dunkeld Railway were able to look around this area. The original booking office

window was one feature noted. Unfortunately, the educational organisation based there in 2006 has now moved out.

A major issue has arisen with Dunkeld & Birnam as a result of the decision to dual the A9 road. Because of the lack of space at Birnam when the new A9 was built in the 1970s, it came straight through the goods yard and the original approach road to the station. Dualling the road here is extremely difficult because of the station building on one side and houses on the other. Three proposals have been put forward by Jacobs, the consultants for the dualling. Two involve moving the station (but not the station building) to the north. The third would mean the station staying in its original position, but only five metres from the A9 and the construction of a substantial retaining wall for the road. There is danger that if a new station is constructed to the north, the basic maintenance of the existing building will not be guaranteed. Developments at Birnam need to be monitored.

Pitlochry Station is, as Simon Jenkins writes in his new book *Britain's 100 Best*



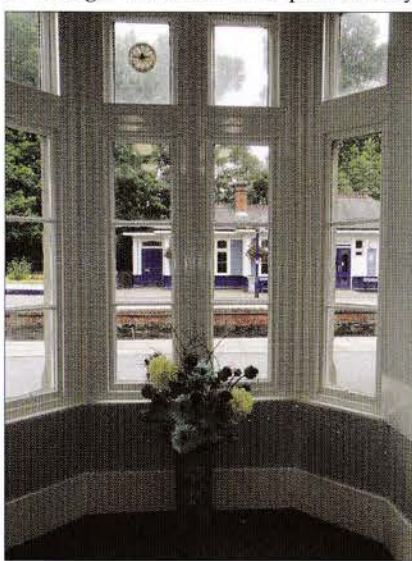
Dunkeld station building from the footbridge in March 2009. The existing A9 can be seen on the right just beyond the parked cars. (Keith Fenwick)

*Railway Stations*, "an admirable community station beautifully maintained". On a recent visit I certainly thought the facilities were of a far higher standard than many stations serving far larger centres of population. The CRP is, however, unhappy that the northbound wooden waiting room is used for salt storage. They have commissioned a local architect to draw up plans for the renovation of the waiting room for use as offices by the Community Rail Partnership and Pitlochry in Bloom.

An article in the October edition of *Modern Railways* about the upgrade of the Highland Main Line stated that the colour light signals for the longer loop at Pitlochry would be controlled from Stanley Junction box. This would mean that the signal cabins at Pitlochry (and presumably also eventually at Dunkeld & Birnam) would no longer be required. The Pitlochry signal box is included in the Listing for the station and is a structure that a use needs to be found for.

At Kingussie station the southbound platform (see rear cover) has recently been raised, doing away with the need for the yellow box steps which are still used at Dunkeld & Birnam. The footbridge linking the two platforms is, however, in need of the restoration that took place to the bridge at Pitlochry. This is something that the CRP is pressing for. The other issue at Kingussie is that the southern section of the main building, formerly used by the local authority, is now empty and being offered for sale.

There are clearly challenges ahead to ensure that the important architectural heritage of the Highland Main Line is maintained. The Community Rail Partnership with its grassroots support is, in many ways, the guardian of this heritage. We must wish it success in its work here and in its other activities.



Looking through the window of the waiting room in the main building at Pitlochry. Many would wish that they had a similar waiting room at their local station! (Neil Sinclair)



Carr Bridge station showing the hanging baskets and flower tubs maintained by the Friends of Carr Bridge Station. (Roy Brown)