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The Editor
The Scots Magazine
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Dundee

Dear Sir,

The June 1983 number of "The Scots Magazine" contains an article, pp. 253 to 257, called "Tales of the "Coffee Pot" ". It has evoked many memories of that branch line from The Mound to Dornoch. This line was opened in June 1902, and in 1903 my family paid its first visit to Dornoch. Altogether my twin sister and I spent 50 summer holidays there, and always considered Dornoch as our "second home".

But I cannot recall the engine of the train ever having been called "The Coffee Pot".

I have somewhere a p.p.c. of the cartoon referred to on p.257. The caption is "To the Mound and back in wan day". I do not remember seeing a cup of coffee perched on the funnel. The train is being drawn by a donkey, and a woman with a red flag stands in front of it, saying "Not so fast". There are a few guards & conductors (?) playing some game in a field beside the train.

I remember well looking out for the first of the "landmarks" mentioned by James A. Simpson, and a few more as well. Along Loch Fleet one looked for herons, curlews, & various kinds of ducks. On the other side were Ben Bhraggie, with its "Monument" to the 1st Duke of Sutherland, and a glimpse of Dunrobin Castle. As one came round the corner to the Dornoch Firth, the lighthouse on the point of Tarbatness came into view. On the golf links, one looked to recognise any of the players.

It was Beeching's "economies" which dispensed with the gate-keepers at the level crossings. The train would stop at the closed gate – the guard (but his name was not David Laird) would open both gates. The train would chug slowly through; the guard would close both gates while the train halted again; sometimes he had to get into the train after it had started to move off again. As far as I remember there were 5 such crossings between the Mound and Dornoch.

We also once had the experience of an unexpected halt near Skelbo station, while the engine driver chased a sheep off the line.

The photographs of Dornoch Station also evoked many memories. Pre World War I there were 3 passenger trains leaving it in the day – one early, one at 11.05 a.m. and one about 5.00 p.m.. In those days there were very few cars; passengers mostly left Dornoch by train. Several families came year after year; we used to quit the

beach to go & “see them off” at the station (usually by the 11.05 a.m.) & present them with sweets for the journey.

I have photos, taken 1933, of 2 “fisher wives” from Embo waiting with empty creels to take the train back. They used often to walk to Dornoch from Embo, with the previous night’s “catch” – the creels were suspended by a rope round the forehead). They often walked barefoot, with their boots slung round their necks, & sat down on some steps into the Earls Cross woods to put the books on before proceeding into the “Royal Burgh” to sell their fish. (Now-a-days, the fish seems to come by van from Aberdeen). In Embo the population were “all cousins”. We were told that if anyone married an “outsider” the couple were not allowed to live in the village. They spoke Gaelic amongst themselves.

For several years the “clerkess” at Dornoch station was Cathie Grant, who had a twin sister, Daisy. My twin & I played many foursomes against them. Their father was for many years the professional at the Royal Dornoch Golf Club. Daisy unfortunately developed multiple sclerosis a few years ago, but Cathie is still playing. Last autumn she was one of 46000 entrants of players from clubs all over England, Scotland, Ireland & Wales, to qualify to represent Scotland in an International Tournament organised by Ford’s, at Stockport. Cathie helped Scotland to win the Tournament; she did not lose a match though she only halved her single against a Welsh opponent, which she should have won, having been dormy 3. But she 3-putted on the 16th, 17th & 18th.

Another personal memory is that it was at Dornoch Station, about 1906 or 1907, that I first used a telephone.

I have a photo also of the engine of the Branch line train at the Mound station. I am not sure if it was the original alleged “Coffee Pot”, but it was fairly ancient. It was said that it was only kept functioning because the driver spent his Sundays in the engine shed, keeping it in good repair.

Those were the days when the Sabbath was very strictly observed in the north of Scotland. I remember criticism of sisters who, as there was no Sunday golf, went off in their cars to John O’Groats, or the West Coast. (This was in the 1930’s). Walks were allowed. Usually golfers walked on the links, exchanging stories of recent triumphs or disasters.

The Highland Railway for years was not characterised by punctuality. I think that this was because, for most of the way, it was a single line; therefore one late train would cause delays at the stations for all subsequent trains. It was not unusual to arrive at Dornoch up to two hours behind the scheduled time, after a long wait at the Mound. There was often time there, even, to go for a walk.

But the most unusual time was about 1955. When my brother & sister and I arrived at the Mound there was no Dornoch train waiting! The reason was that our tickets had not been inspected after Inverness & the station master at the Mound had been informed that there were no passengers for Dornoch, so he had let the train depart. We sat on a seat in bright sunshine, listening to a radio broadcast of rain in London until after about half-an-hour we saw the hastily summoned train from

Dornoch coming at a fair pace along the side of Loch Fleet. This is the only time we had a “special” for part of the journey. There was one other passenger – a resident of Dornoch.

I made my 51st visit to Dornoch just over a year ago. My twin sister died in February 1982. In her will, made in 1969, she directed that her body should be cremated, & the ashes conveyed to Dornoch for burial in Proncynain Cemetery, about ½ mile to the N. W. of the Royal Burgh. So in April a friend & I made the journey, by taxi all the way. The problems of shortage of porters & 3 changes of train, with such a precious piece of “luggage” was too daunting.

My sister had collapsed, about 4 years previously, with acute cerebral meningitis, & therefore had to spend the rest of her life in “Homes”. She had always been very active, playing golf, (& hockey until she was aged 65), cycling and walking. She just HATED being so physically handicapped that she could barely stand unsupported, let alone walk. I used to visit her 3 times a week, and she constantly told me that she did not want to go on living in that condition. She did sometimes ask for “exercise” which consisted of myself walking backwards, holding her hands, while she shuffled after me. She “walked” better if I sang to her. One of her favourite songs was the Skye Boat Song. Also useful for arm exercises – when she was sitting in her chair. (You may remember that some months ago I wrote to you about an article in the Scots Magazine; the author alleged that the words were not written until about 1904; whereas our family used words which our mother had learnt in the 1880’s)

Enclosed is a copy of a “Requiem” which my sister had written in 1969, I found it in an envelope with a copy of her will. I could not grieve for her overmuch, because she had been so miserable for the last years of her life, and I was happy to be able to carry out her wishes. We had always looked upon Dornoch as our “second home”, & felt that we “belonged” there. In fact, one old friend, during this visit, introduced me to her sister-in law with the comment: “The Macleods have always been landmarks in Dornoch”. And nearly everyone I met, after expressing sympathy with me because of my sister’s death, said “It’s nice to see ye back here”!

So after a memorial service in the Cathedral (you can see it in the background in the photo on p.253) my sister’s ashes were interred where she wished. The Minister read the “Requiem” before the casket was lowered into the grave.

I very much doubt whether I shall be able to afford another visit to Dornoch in my life-time. I have left instructions in my will that my ashes shall be buried in the same “Lair” as my sister’s. There is just a faint chance that I may win, with one of those “Lucky Numbers” allotted by some firms, the choice of a car or a cash prize. I have 3 Lucky Numbers outstanding in one firm’s “Prize Draw”, and one in each of two others, so have not given up hope yet. A car would be of no use to me, but I could do a lot with the cash, besides a Dornoch holiday for myself & my brother. I know many people who would appreciate an “unbirthday” present.

Yours sincerely E.A.Macleod