

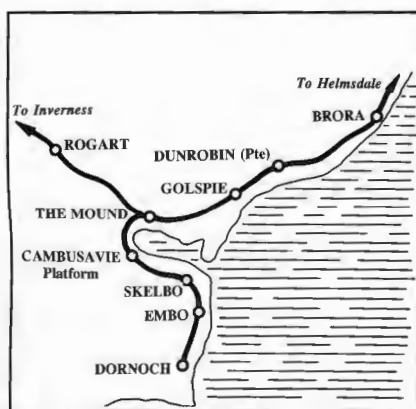
*Just a few lines . . .*

## HIGHLAND BRANCHES OF THE FAR NORTH

I. C. Coleford

**S**cotland's railway network once included many lines across bleak and inhospitable terrain and, arguably, one of the bleakest (albeit most spectacular) stretches of line was the one through Sutherland and Caithness to Wick. North of the Dornoch Firth, this line spawned branches to Dornoch, Thurso and Lybster, each of which had its own claim to fame.

### The Dornoch Branch



The Sutherland Railway, which was worked by the Highland Railway, opened the Bonar Bridge to Golspie section of its line on 13 April 1868. The route had been largely dictated by the local topography, and one consequence was that Dornoch, the County Town of Sutherland, was left stranded some seven miles from the railway. A coach service was provided



between Dornoch and The Mound (the nearest station on the main line) but, as the years went by, that mode of transport was viewed with increasing dissatisfaction.

It took the passing of the Light Railways Act in 1896 to prompt serious thoughts of building a branch line to Dornoch. The Act was intended to simplify the mechanics of promoting and constructing secondary and rural railways — it enabled lines authorised by the Act to be built to lighter standards and to be exempt from certain regulations concerning platforms, level-crossings and signalling, etc. Furthermore, the Government made £1 million available for grants and loans for approved lines.

In August 1898, the Dornoch Light Railway was incorporated to construct a line between Dornoch and The Mound. Although the company had been promoted locally and was completely independent, it had the support of, and the offer of a working agreement from, the Highland Railway. The Highland had, by

*Above: The typical Highland Railway-pattern of running-in board, at The Mound station.  
A. B. MacLeod*

*Below: The Mound station, on 23 April 1952, from the south, and showing the Dornoch branch curving away to the right.  
H. C. Casserley*





*Left: In lined black livery, 0-4-4T No 55053 is pictured at the Dornoch terminus, in July 1955, with the 1.00pm mixed train for The Mound. T. J. Edginton/Colour-Rail SC134*

*Right: An interesting photograph of The Mound station, showing that a BR Class '2' 2-6-0, temporary motive power for the Dornoch branch, was in use after the first of the Western pannier tanks had arrived. On 29 May 1957, No 78052 is on the branch train while No 1646 is coupled to an ex-LMS 12-wheeled restaurant car that will be added to the 11.31am departure to Inverness, having worked this far on the early morning train to the Far North. J. Spencer Gilks*

*Below: Ex-Western Region 0-6-0PT No 1646 awaits departure from Dornoch with the early afternoon train for The Mound in May 1957. The small goods shed and yard are seen on the right. N. Sprinks/Colour-Rail SC188*

then, long-since swallowed up the Sutherland Railway, which had constructed the line through The Mound.

Despite the scope for economies offered by the Light Railways Act, the Board of Trade insisted that the Dornoch line be fenced throughout and have gates at all of its level-crossings. Nevertheless, certain archetypal light-railway practices were authorised, including the use of comparatively lightweight rails and the spiking of the rails direct to the sleepers. In order to keep construction costs to a minimum, the line was built with gradients of up to 1 in 50 — a more-level course

would have required extensive (and costly) earthworks.

The Dornoch Light Railway opened for business on 2 June 1902. It was originally worked by the Highland Railway at cost price but, from September 1906, the light-railway company paid the Highland a commercial rate for its services. In July 1904, the light-railway company opened the *Station Hotel* at Dornoch — it wasn't only the large concerns which owned their own hotels! The Dornoch Light Railway retained its independent existence until the Grouping, when it was swallowed up by the LMS.

The Mound — where the branch diverged from the main line — was named after Thomas Telford's road embankment of 1817. The branch trains had their own platform at The Mound — indeed, through running from a 'main line' to a light railway was not viewed favourably by the Board of Trade. Nevertheless, not long after the branch opened, a morning train from Dornoch continued beyond The Mound to Brora (and back again), that service operating three times a week during the summer and once weekly during the rest of the year. Furthermore, for just one summer, a through





sleeping carriage between Euston and Dornoch was advertised, the coach being taken off at The Mound and attached to the branch train. The success of that service can, however, be gauged by its very brief existence.

From The Mound, the branch fell away at 1 in 50 to the shore of Loch Fleet which it crossed, in conjunction with the road, on a long causeway. The first stopping place was Cambusavie Platform (1m 28ch from The Mound), which was advertised in the public timetables as a request stop.

Continuing southwards, there were stations at Skelbo (3m 60ch) and Embo (5m 33ch), before the terminus at Dornoch (7m 51ch) was reached. The branch terminus comprised a single platform, a run-round loop, a modest goods yard, and a single-road engine shed. A little to the north of the station, a private siding to a timber yard was added, circa 1918.

When the line opened, the inaugural train was hauled by Stroudley 0-6-0T No 56 which, in deference to its new

sphere of activity, had its original name of *Balnain* replaced by *Dornoch*. The locomotive's axle-weight of only 10 tons was ideal for the line, and it became the regular branch engine; when it was away for

**Below: This view of 0-4-4T No 55053 shows that even the bunker rear sheet was fully lined-out at the engine's 1955 overhaul. The engine had only weeks of life before it met with the defect that led to its withdrawal. It is working the 11.55am train to Dornoch, which is seen approaching Cambusavie Platform.**

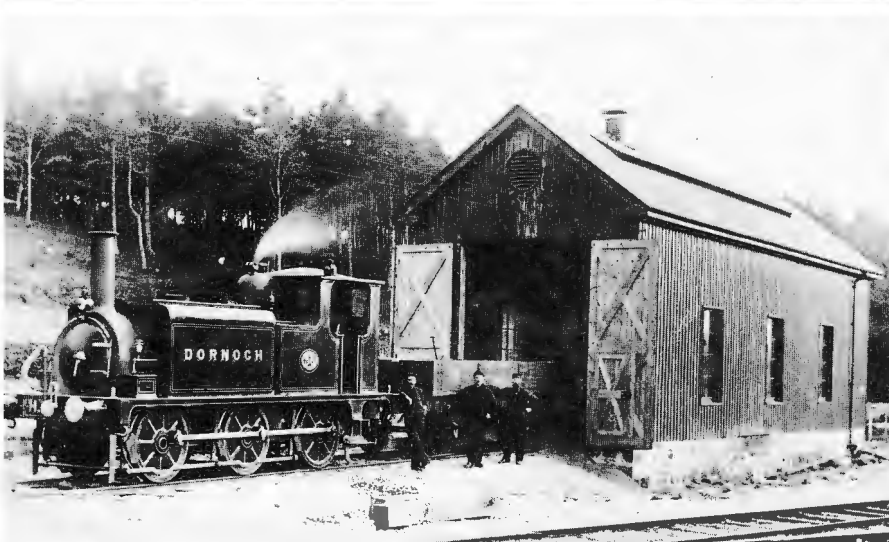
*W. J. Verden Anderson/Rail Archive Stephenson*





**Above:** In 1956, the 1.00pm Dornoch to The Mound mixed train makes sedate progress, not long after departure from the terminus. The engine is Drummond 0-4-4T No 55053, in its last year of service. Behind the engine is one of the re-panelled LMS corridor brake composites of the 1920s that were modernised in the 1930s and seemed to be favourites for service in northern Scotland. *W. J. Verden Anderson/Rail Archive Stephenson*

**Below:** This Peter Drummond 0-4-4T, LMS No 15052 (HR No 40 *Gordon Lennox*, built 1905), was perhaps the least photographed of its class. It is seen with the 9.00am departure at Dornoch, on 19 May 1928. *H. C. Casserley*



repair, its most usual replacement was Jones's lightweight 0-4-4T No 53 *Lybster*. Drummond's 0-4-4Ts took over most of the branch duties from around 1919 — HR Nos 45 and 46 (later LMS Nos 15053 and 15054) and, in the 1920s, LMS No 15051 (ex-HR No 25) being the most regularly used.

From the 1920s through to the 1940s, the timetables usually advertised three trains each-way on weekdays with journey times of around 25 minutes. As with many other light railways, the usual practice was the running of mixed trains. By the early 1950s, the branch train usually comprised just one corridor composite brake coach, behind which a handful of assorted freight wagons was normally attached. At that time, there were only two services each-way on weekdays, the journey times having been increased to 45 minutes, as the train crews were, by then, required to operate the gates at all six level-crossings.

During the early 1950s, the regular branch engines were BR Nos 55051 and 55053 — the two surviving Drummond 0-4-4Ts — which were officially allocated to Helmsdale shed for maintenance purposes. No 55051 was laid aside in April 1956 and withdrawn in July of that year. When relief was required for the one

**Left:** Highland Railway 0-6-0T No 56 *Dornoch* is seen outside the engine shed at Dornoch. This engine was one of three built between 1869 and 1874, the only HR class to Stroudley's design before he left for the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway, and the first engines to have been built at Lochgorm Works, Inverness. No 56 was renamed *Dornoch* to work the eponymous branch, and was the first engine used on the line. The engine shed at Dornoch was situated on the left, just prior to the line entering the station. *Ian Allan Library*

STEAM DAYS

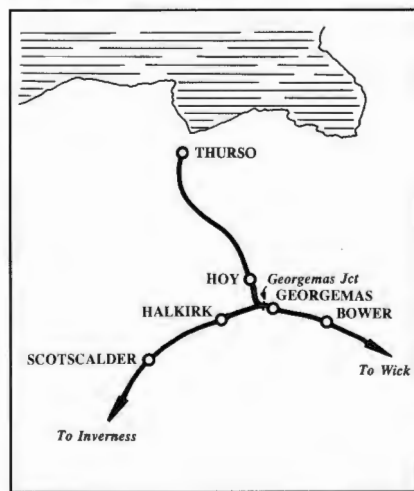
remaining 0-4-4T (No 55053), ex-Caledonian '2P' 0-4-4T No 55236 usually stood in, despite its heavier axleweight.

In July 1955, No 55053 was overhauled at St Rollox Works in Glasgow, and re-emerged in a very smart lined black livery. It was the only ex-Highland engine ever to receive the full BR passenger tank plumage. The engine's life was, however, rather brief as, in November 1956, its front driving axle broke while it was hauling a branch train. Fortunately, the train was not derailed and there were no casualties — apart from the engine itself which never steamed again.

The temporary replacement for the 0-4-4T was a '2MT' 2-6-0 but, in view of the lightweight nature of the branch, that was not considered to be a long-term proposition. The list of possible permanent replacements was somewhat brief, but a solution came from a very unexpected source. In February 1957, six-year-old Western Region '1600' class 0-6-0PT No 1646 was transferred to Helmsdale and, as it proved quite suitable for working the Dornoch branch, classmate No 1649 was similarly transferred, in July 1958.

The 0-6-0 pannier tanks took over all duties on the branch until it closed in June 1960. The official closure date was 13 June but, in the absence of a Sunday service, the last trains ran two days earlier, on the Saturday. The very last revenue-earning working from Dornoch was hauled by 0-6-0PT No 1649. The two pannier tanks remained in Scotland, and were used as station pilots at Dingwall until their withdrawal in December 1962.

## The Thurso Branch



A railway between Wick and Thurso was authorised as early as 1866. It would have been completely isolated from the rest of Scotland's railway network, but an extension to connect with the line edging northwards from Inverness was under consideration. Nothing came of the original plans, but they were revived in 1871 by the Sutherland & Caithness Railway.

The S&CR completed the main line to Wick, which opened on 28 July 1874 and, simultaneously, a branch from Georgemas (14 miles from Wick) to Thurso was unveiled. From the outset, the main line and the branch were both worked by the Highland Railway, which had subscribed £50,000 towards the S&CR — the S&CR was formally absorbed by the Highland Railway in 1884. Georgemas became the

most northerly junction in Britain, and Thurso the most northerly terminus — both retain those claims to fame today.

The Thurso branch was 6m 52ch long and was single-track — in later years (at least) it was subjected to a speed limit of 40mph. The layout at Georgemas Junction permitted direct working between Wick and Inverness, and some local trains were operated thus in the pre-Grouping era. The only intermediate station on the Thurso branch was at Hoy (a mere 75 chains from Georgemas Junction), which opened some four months after the branch was unveiled.

The branch terminus at Thurso had a single platform, with a goods road at the rear face. A short all-over roof protected the terminus end of the platform. There was also a modest goods yard, a stone-built single-road engine shed, and a turntable, the original 45ft 'table being extended to 52ft in 1920. The turntable was dispensed with and the pit filled in during the mid-1950s after tank engines had taken over the branch duties.

The inaugural train on the main line between Inverness and Wick was hauled by 2-4-0 No 2 *Aldourie*, which had been built at Lochgorm Works, Inverness, in 1871. It is believed that the engine subsequently worked the Thurso branch and

*Below: Georgemas Junction, on 25 September 1912. On the left is a train for Helmsdale and the south, featuring a selection of some of the better HR passenger stock. The Thurso branch train has some HR ancients, and awaits Jones 4-4-0T No 54, which is taking water. L&GRP*



**Right:** Thurso station, the furthest north station in the British Isles, some 90 years ago. Highland Railway 2-4-0 (a rebuild of a 2-2-2) No 55 *Invergordon* is at the head of a train whose first vehicle is one of the chariot-ended HR coaches favoured by David Jones during the late 1880s/early 1890s. L&GRP

**Below:** In LMS days, 4-4-0 No 14405 *Ben Rinnes* was one of the regular engines on the Thurso branch and was photographed at the terminus on 19 May 1928, with an ex-L&NWR coach in tow. This was, no doubt, one of the many more modern vehicles at the time drafted to the Highland Section by the LMS. H. C. Casserley

**Bottom:** A general view of Thurso, on 23 April 1952, and illustrating the level of freight traffic at the time. The engine is ex-HR 4-4-0 No 54398 *Ben Alder*, which was withdrawn the following year. The engine shed and turntable are seen on the right. H. C. Casserley



remained there until at least the late 1890s. Another early branch locomotive was 2-2-2 No 13, which had been renamed *Thurso* — presumably in preparation for its new duties — but it was withdrawn in 1890. A 'Glenbarry' class 2-4-0, No 55, which had started life as a 2-2-2, was on the branch around the turn of the century (the engine was withdrawn in 1906), and the Barclay 'Small Goods' 2-4-0s of 1863 almost certainly worked on the branch until the early 1900s.

In the 20th century, 'Yankee' 4-4-0T No 54 worked the Thurso branch from circa 1912. That engine was one of five which had been built by Dübs & Co for the Uruguay Eastern Railway but, after the order had been cancelled, was purchased instead by the Highland. It was, however, uncommon to see a tank engine on the branch until BR days, the usual practice of the Highland Railway (and, later, the LMS) being to use ageing tender engines which had been displaced from

main-line duties. Among the displaced engines known to have worked the Thurso branch were 'Strath' 4-4-0 No 89 *Sir George* of 1892, which was noted on the branch in 1914, and 'Clyde Bogie' No 79A *Atholl* of 1886, noted in 1919. Peter Drummond's 'Small Ben' 4-4-0s subsequently took over most of the duties, although his 'Barney' 0-6-0s were no strangers to the line. Indeed, in 1926, 'Barney' No 17702 (ex-HR No 21) was the regular branch engine.

During LMS days, the 'Bens' which appeared on the Thurso branch most frequently were Nos 14402 *Ben Armin* and 14405 *Ben Rinnes*. Seven of the 'Bens' survived long enough to become British Railways stock, but only three received their designated BR numbers. -These were Nos 54398 *Ben Alder*, 54399 *Ben Wyvis*, and 54404 *Ben Clebrig*, all of which ended their days based at Wick, from where one or two were regularly out-stationed at Thurso. Their usual companion at Thurso in the early 1950s was ex-Caledonian '3F' 0-6-0 No 57585.

After the much-mourned extinction of the 'Bens' in 1953, ex-Caledonian '3P' 4-4-0s took over most of the Thurso duties until 1956, when LMS '3P' 2-6-2T No 40150 arrived. The 2-6-2T remained until the introduction of diesel traction in May 1961 and, after the closure of the



engine shed at Thurso, the diesel engines were stabled at the station.

Passenger services on the Thurso branch were never particularly prolific. The timetables for the summer of 1922, for example, listed five trains each-way on weekdays. By March 1940, that had been reduced to four each-way and, after the war, two trains each-way were considered sufficient, albeit with a third train each-way during the peak holiday season. Somewhat ironically, a recent BR summer timetable listed four services each-way on weekdays and two on Sundays — Sunday services were certainly not a regular feature in years gone by.

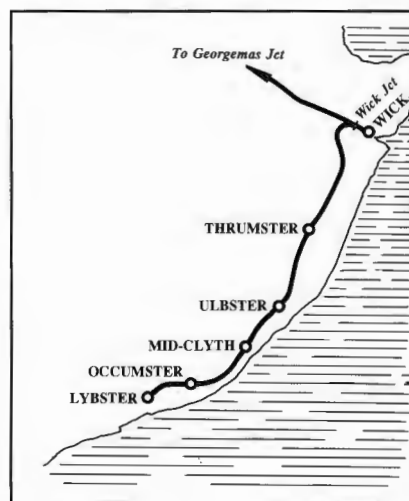
The branch has not, however, been immune from economies. Hoy station closed on 29 November 1965, having been reduced to the status of an unstaffed halt as early as January 1935. Somewhat mysteriously, public goods facilities seem to have been made available at Hoy in 1941, but they appear to have been short-lived.

The Thurso branch has not depended only on passenger traffic for its well-being. Goods traffic has always played a role, but never as intensively as during both World wars. During World War I, Thurso was a vital connection in the transportation link to Orkney, where the Grand Fleet was based, the trains carrying men and supplies for shipment to Scapa Flow, being known as 'Jellicoe Specials'. It was a similar story in World War II, albeit without Earl Jellicoe.

The LMS Working Instructions for the branch for late 1945 showed that mineral trains were allowed sixteen minutes from Georgemas to Thurso, and fifteen minutes for the return trip. Similar timings have prevailed for passenger workings since before the Grouping. After the war, some of the materials for the new atomic reactor at Dounreay were transported by rail as far as Thurso, which probably explained the continuing presence of the '3F' 0-6-0 at Thurso until the early 1950s. Today, the branch still handles traffic to and from Dounreay.



### The Lybster Branch



In common with the branch to Dornoch, the Lybster branch was promoted and authorised under the terms of the 1896 Light Railways Act. One of the Act's intentions was to help the construction of lines to agricultural or fishing communities and, as the village of Lybster was, in the 1890s, the third largest herring port in

Scotland, the proposed line certainly qualified for assistance.

The Wick & Lybster Light Railway was formed in 1899. Of the £71,000 required for its construction, £25,000 was provided by the Government, the other main financiers being Caithness County Council and the major local landowner, the Duke of Portland. The actual construction of the line cost £45,515. That worked out at around £3,500 per mile, which was less than almost all other light railways of the period. For example, the Derwent Valley Light Railway cost £5,475 per mile, the Rother Valley (later part of the Kent & East Sussex Railway) cost £6,376 per mile, and the Nidd Valley, £10,450 per mile.

*Top: Latter-day branch power on the Thurso branch was in the shape of Stanier Class '3' 2-6-2T No 40150, which is seen waiting to leave Thurso on 2 May 1957 with the 3.40pm departure, which includes through coaches for Inverness. Hugh Ballantyne*

*Below: Wick, on 25 September 1912, with the Lybster branch locomotive attached to a Highland Railway wagon in the yard. The 0-4-4T is No 53 Lybster, which worked the inaugural train and survived at work on the line until 1929. L&GRP*





From 1921, the Lybster branch saw some additional Saturday passenger traffic, albeit from a source not of the railway company's own making. In that year, the councillors of Wick decided to close all that town's licensed premises and, despite the apparently prolific bootlegging industry which soon sprung up in Wick, thirsty locals who preferred to behave legally found that the nearest sources of legitimate refreshment were Thurso and Lybster. The latter was more accessible by rail, and special trains were subsequently run to and from Lybster on Saturdays for the benefit of those citizens of Wick who did not wish to adopt teetotal (or illegal) ways.

The 'Saturday Specials' were, however, not enough to keep the railway in profits and, by the time the W&L was taken over by the LMS at the Grouping in 1923, it was operating at a loss. In common with many other small local railways throughout Britain, the Lybster branch was affected by the growth of road transport

**Whatever their fortunes in later years, the Far North branches enjoyed a brief period of relative prosperity before World War I and, in the case of the Wick & Lybster Light Railway, before the Highland Railway became too grasping. This is the scene from the buffer-stops at Lybster on 25 September 1912, when some 50 people seem to have been disgorged by the branch mixed train. The aged Highland low-roofed, 4-wheeled passenger stock will be noted, the ribbed-sided example dating from the 1870s and its companion, from the 1880s. Lybster engine shed and water tower appears to the right. L&GRP**

during the 1920s and 1930s. At that time, the local roads were not at all good, but in the early 1940s a new main road (now the A9) opened over the Ord of Caithness. The improvement to local road communications was a major blow to the branch which, despite handling some extra traffic to and from the military camp which had recently opened just to the north of Lybster, was running at a perpetual loss.

It came as little surprise when it was announced that, as a war-time economy, services on the branch would be suspended as from Saturday, 1 April 1944. When peace was restored, the LMS argued that some £27,000 would have to be spent on relaying the line and, in view

of the branch's poor prospects, such an outlay was considered unjustifiable. The overall attitude of the LMS to the line was, however, questionable. When the new main road had opened in the early 1940s, a regular bus service between Wick and Lybster had been introduced by the Highland Transport Company. That concern was an associate of the LMS.

The inevitable outcome was that the Lybster branch — the most northerly light railway in Britain — was not reopened. Its permanent closure was officially sanctioned in 1949 but, for what it was worth, the stations at Ulbster, Occumster and Lybster were retained as non-rail connected goods depots until 1 February 1951.

