

By courtesy of Mrs Shona Grant

It took all these people to declare the line open. Note the old sleepers used for the platform wall and the lack of proper ballast on the track. As an undertaking within the Light Railway Order it could benefit from such economies.

directors at the Mound and accompanied them in his own luxury carriage to Dornoch Station where they were met by the town council who had marched from the municipal buildings preceded by the local band. Although it was a wet and miserable June day, about a thousand people gathered for the opening ceremony.

In the Sutherland Arms Hotel a civic luncheon was held to mark the momentous occasion. The toast to the honoured guests, the directors of the Highland Railway Company, was proposed by the minister of Dornoch Cathedral, the Rev. Donald Grant. In the official programme he is listed as "The Croupier", an interesting reminder that the term, now normally associated with gaming tables, was originally used to describe the assistant chairman at a public dinner.

Unlike many other light railways, the Board of Trade had insisted that the line be fenced throughout, and that gates be provided at the many level crossings. A viaduct was built to carry the line over what is now the A9 and Loch Fleet at the Mound station.

Today only the viaduct piers remain and a mere handful of people live at the Mound, but earlier this century it was a sizeable community consisting of railway families, a pearl fisher and Indian salesmen who stayed in huts in the woods nearby. They would receive their wares, cash-on-delivery, at the station and then set off on their travels all over the North. The Mound had the distinction of being probably the most "prayed-in" station in Scotland, for a church service was held on Sundays in one of the waiting-rooms while a Sunday



By courtesy of Mrs Shona Grant

The scene at Dornoch, 81 years ago, shortly after passenger services began on the little branch line on June 2nd, 1902. The "Coffee Pot" is seen here with a group of admirers.

Tales of the "Coffee Pot"

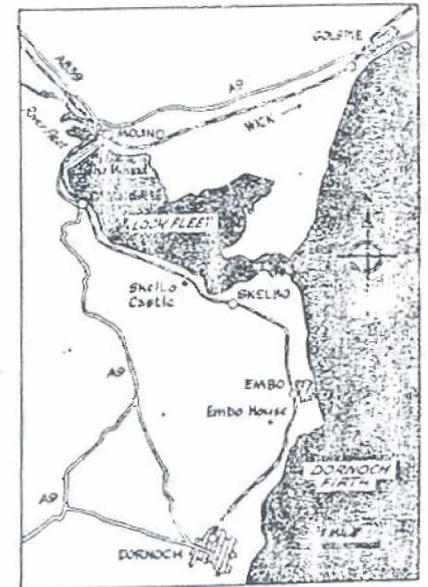
JAMES A. SIMPSON

MENTION the "Coffee Pot" in Sutherland, and most younger folk will think of a favourite brand, or possibly a snack bar. Older natives, however, will recall with affection the little locomotive, with the coffee-pot like funnel, which for 60 years ran between Dornoch and the Mound. "Crawled" might be a more appropriate word to describe its unhurried motion as it made its way along the eight-mile track.

At the turn of the century, Dornoch, with its magnificent golf course and fine sandy beaches, was fast becoming a popular holiday resort. The opening in 1902 of the branch line to link Dornoch with the main Inverness-Wick railway, was a festive occasion. A public holiday was declared and householders were asked to decorate their homes with bunting.

The Duke of Sutherland had gifted the land for the track together with a

lump sum of £5000 to the Highland Railway Company. He joined the



gathering winkles and mussels.

Between the Mound and Dornoch there were many places of historical interest. A thousand years before the railway, invading Vikings had parked their longboats in Loch Fleet. These shaggy-haired marauders did not spend all their time fighting. Many proved to be sturdy farmers and peaceful settlers. Having earlier colonised Orkney and Shetland, Sutherland to them was the South Lands, hence the name. Embo and Skelbo, the names of two stations along the route, were of Viking origin, *bo* being the old Norse word for farm or beach place.

As the Coffee Pot chugged round Loch Fleet, passengers could admire the ruins of the mediaeval Skelbo Castle. It was there in the late 13th century that the royal reception party was staying when they learned of the premature death of Queen Margaret as she sailed from Norway. They had travelled north to welcome the young Maid of Norway. The station after Skelbo was Embo, an attractive little fishing village which had mushroomed at the time of the Clearances. From the train there was a good view of "Grannie's Heilan Hame", later made famous in the song.

Shortly after leaving Embo the train passed the Royal Dornoch Golf Course where the game has been played for 400 years. On the other side of the track one could see Embo House, an elegant four-storey mansion, built in the 18th century after the fashion of the great houses then springing up in Edinburgh. From there it was on to Dornoch station situated near the town's mediaeval Cathedral Square.

Many are the stories associated with the Coffee Pot. Davie Laird, one of the last guards to serve on the train, tells how the adjudicator for the Dornoch Drama Festival, a Mr

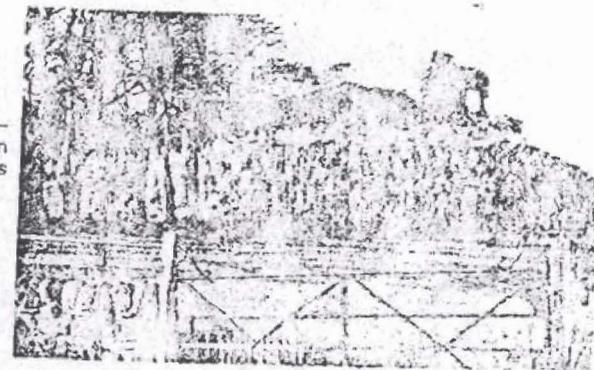
Pullman, once travelled on the train. That evening the festival chairman pointed out that in future the people of Dornoch would be able to claim that the rail journey to Dornoch had once been made by Pullman! Mr Pullman had been intrigued by the massive key ring which Davie Laird carried, there being a different key for each of the six level-crossing gates. He was also intrigued at seeing Davie leave the train at each stop, open the gate, wave the train through and then close it. A few weeks later, a letter by Mr Pullman appeared in a national newspaper in which he said it was "easier to get into Heaven than into Dornoch."

It being assumed in Sutherland that railway law had lost its sting long before reaching Dornoch, things happened on the branch line which would have been frowned on in high places. I think for example of how morning papers were thrown from the train to the houses at the side of the line, and of how some of those flood detonators were laid at intervals along the line to give newly-married couples a memorable start as they set off on their honeymoons. When, on one occasion, a lady pulled the communication cord, no one knew how to release it!

In September 1939, the Coffee Pot was used to carry more than 100 volunteers from the Dornoch area to the Mound station. Within days of war being declared they had joined up, many with the Seaforths. It was a moving time for all concerned, with emotional farewells being said to girl-friends, wives and mothers. The comment of one recruit, obviously of farming stock, brought a little light relief. As he paced the station platform he was heard to mutter, "Could yon Hitler not have waited until the harvest was in?"

Other stories underline the fact that though the journey was

The ruins of Skelbo Castle—
one of the sights to be seen
as the little train made its
way to and from Dornoch.



James A. Simpson

School was held in the other.

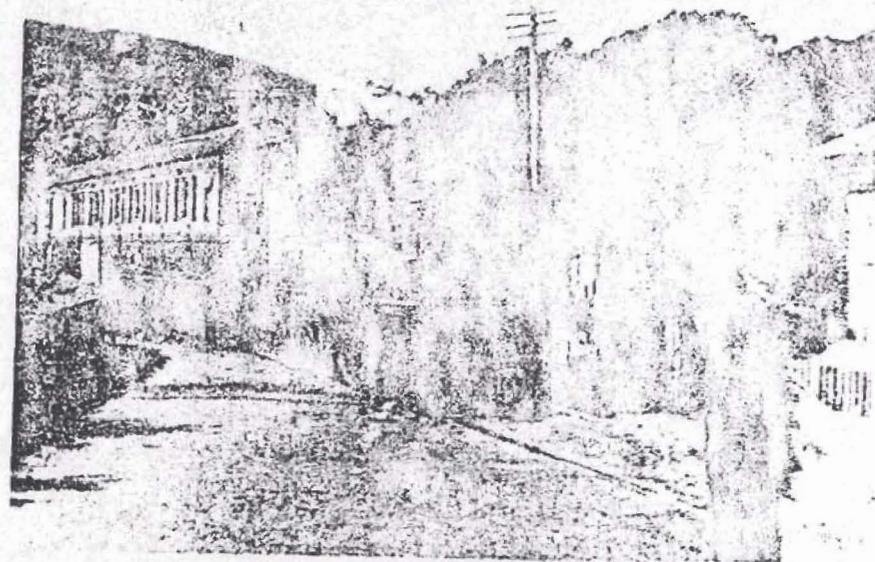
For the major part of the journey, the line ran along the shores of Loch Fleet and the Dornoch Firth. The scenery was breathtaking, the Sutherland hills towering in the background, seagulls circling overhead, waves breaking on the sandy beaches. Parts of the track were so close to the shore that flooding could be a problem. On such

occasions, to warn the approaching driver, the ganger who inspected the track daily, would place detonators on the line.

On summer days, those arriving on holiday could feel, through open windows, the welcome touch of the salt-laden wind on their faces. Occasionally they would catch a glimpse of a diving osprey, of salmon leaping in the water or of locals

Crossing the A9 at the Mound in early British Railways days. Guard Davie Laird holds the gate in the foreground.

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scenically spectacular and historically interesting, speed was not the train's most striking characteristic, certainly not in its latter days when the guard had to open the gates. In earlier times they had been opened by crossing-keepers who occupied the railway cottages. One story tells how, as the train was pulling out of Dornoch, a traveller came rushing on to the platform. "If I run, can I catch it?" he shouted to the porter. "Sir, if you run, you can beat it!"

Another story tells how one day the Coffee Pot suddenly screeched to a halt. When an American in the train asked the guard what had happened, he was informed there was a sheep on the line. The sheep having been removed, the train proceeded on its way. A few minutes later the brakes were once again quickly applied. Again the American put his head out of the window and asked whether it was another sheep on the line. "No," replied the guard, "the same sheep!"

A cartoonist once depicted the

train with a cup of coffee perched on its funnel. The caption below read, "To the Mound and back in one day!"

As cars became more numerous and road surfaces were improved, the Coffee Pot was used less and less. Finally, in 1960, the line was closed. As often happens many who seldom travelled by train gathered at the station to see the Coffee Pot chug out of Dornoch and into history.

Today you can travel by car from Dornoch to the Mound in a fraction of the time it took to travel by rail. But without doubt something of the romance has gone. The A9 by-passes many of the beauty spots and places of historical interest which could be seen from the Coffee Pot. The old level crossing at Cambusavie where the line crossed the A9, used to advertise the warning, "Stop, Look and Listen". Perhaps this notice should have been left for the benefit of today's fast-travelling motorists, for though we have more speed, many have less observation.

An evocative memory from the 1950's as a successor to the original Coffee Pot simmers at Skelbo station on a hot summer day.

J. MacLauchlan

