

1983 to 2018 A short history of Friends of the West Highland Lines

1983:- Society founded at Crianlarich to fight threatened closure of the lines north and west of Crianlarich recommended by the Serpel Report.

Very shortly branches were formed in Oban, Glasgow and even London.

The campaign was successful. After that some members felt the job was done and left. Others felt it would be good to hold on to such an organisation in case the line was threatened again in the future. So the Society continued. Members met regularly at all 3 branches, but more as a hobby club for people interested in the West Highland Lines.

It became active again when the sleeper service from Fort William to London was threatened. This campaign was largely fought by the London Branch. The service was saved when the **FRIENDS** along with others pointed out that withdrawal of the daily trains over the Cowlairs Curve in Glasgow constituted a line closure and would have to go through the line closure procedure. At this point B.R. decided not to go through the closure procedure. They would continue to run the Fort William sleeper, but in a much truncated form of just 2 sleeping cars.

By the time railway privatisation came along, society was changing and not so many people wanted to go out on winter nights to indulge in a hobby. The branches discontinued and the main Society Committee took on the role of being the lobbying and rail user group for the West Highland Lines.

Some achievements since then are, starting just after privatisation.

- We convinced ScotRail, under National Express management, of the merits of reintroducing a seated coach on the overnight sleeper. So successful was this innovation it was also introduced on all the other sleeper services.

- Space on the Class 156 Sprinter units was altered to accommodate 6 bicycles per 2 coach unit.
- A mid-morning north bound service to Oban with a counterbalancing mid afternoon South bound service. To begin with we achieved only partial success in getting this service improvement. Due to weekday shortage of units ScotRail at first agreed to this on a Saturdays only basis. The latest franchise now has 6 trains per day between Oban and Glasgow, including this mid morning/mid afternoon service, with additional schools services.
- A Sunday afternoon train from Oban to Glasgow.
- A Sunday morning day excursion train from Edinburgh to Oban.
- Extensive tree clearance along the line. Initially this was done in co-operation with Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. It has now been built in to the franchise that the operator will set aside £50,000 per year for cutting vegetation to restore iconic views on scenic lines.
- We introduced the very popular free scenic post cards given out from the buffet trolley. All the images were provided by our own photographer.
- We lobbied for tourist friendly trains. In the present franchise, air-conditioned Class 158 units will replace the Class 156 units. Seating will be realigned to ensure there are no obstructed view seats.

Looking to the future we will encourage Transport Scotland to end the 6 hour gap between trains on the Mallaig – Fort William – Glasgow service.

Now is the time to start designing proper brand-new tourist friendly trains specially made for the job, ready for the next franchise.

Some of our members who live near the lines have become station adopters. Our membership now extends throughout the British Isles and beyond, made up of people who just love the West Highland Lines.