

How Telford opened up the north – but the budget went out of the door!

In the first of a two-part series, EILEEN MACASKILL gives us this fascinating account of the improvements to the A9 road north of Inverness over the years, and the “rise and fall” of the railway service, with a particular insight into The Mound crossing. Eileen was Curriculum Resources Officer for Highland Schools until 1996 and compiled in excess of 40 booklets, mostly on local history, which went into Secondary School libraries, many Primary Schools and some Public Libraries. She has twice been President of the Inverness Field Club. We would like to thank Peter Wild at Historylinks, Dornoch, for his help in sourcing photographs.

● See more photos on their website – www.historylinks.org.uk

AS soon as the Jacobite Risings began, it became clear to the British Government that something would have to be done to restore order, especially in the north of Scotland.

General Wade was in no doubt that soldiers would need to be involved, that they would need forts with barracks and that there would need to be a road system to make it possible for men to march from fort to fort as required.

Wade’s work began in 1725 and by the time he left Scotland around 1740, over 240 miles of roads had been created or improved and 40 new bridges had been built. Military road building had ceased by 1790.

Not a lot was done about roads north of Inverness.

Various Government Commissions were established in the hope that employment would bring peace.

The Board of Trustees for Manufactures and Fisheries was in operation from 1727 until 1844.

The British Fisheries Society was in operation from 1786 until 1893. The British Linen Company was established in 1746 and eventually became the British Linen Bank.

Post Culloden, the estates of those landowners who had taken part were confiscated by the Forfeited Estates Commission and not restored until 1784, provided they paid towards the costs of estate improvements undertaken while run by the Commission.

It would appear that the establishing of the Highlands and Islands Development

Board by Secretary of State for Scotland, Willie Ross, in 1965 wasn’t exactly a new idea!

For industry to succeed, there had to be roads – and bridges to take roads across the many rivers.

There would also be a need for much improved harbours and ferries.

On behalf of the British Government, Thomas Telford was sent north in 1801 to survey transport and employment in the north and he was in no doubt that the transport infrastructure would need much upgrading if industry was to have any hope of succeeding.

The Government would pay part of the cost of road construction and the rest would be paid for by the landowners through whose estates the roads passed.

A Commission for Highland Roads and Bridges was established soon after Telford submitted his report.

From then on, the Government would pay part of the cost of road construction and the rest would be paid for by the landowners through whose estates the roads passed. Instead of the former Military Roads there would now be Parliamentary Roads.

Under the Sutherland Road Act of 1805, progress finally began to be made

to improve or create roads north of Inverness.

While roads and bridges could eventually make the journey from Inverness to the far north possible by going from town to town round the various firths, it was possible to shorten the journey by using ferries across the Beaully Firth, the Cromarty Firth, the Dornoch Firth at Meikle Ferry (the disaster at Meikle Ferry in August 1809, when the over-loaded boat capsized, cost nearly 100 lives) and Loch Fleet at Little Ferry.

By 1812, the first Bonar Bridge had been built. The River Helmsdale was bridged in 1811.

The ferry crossing of Loch Fleet to take traffic from Dornoch to Golspie and on north was rather a dangerous one at certain states of the tide, yet despite this, Telford planned to continue using it as part of the Great North Road as he was in no doubt that to create an alternative crossing of Loch Fleet would be extremely costly.

The Countess of Sutherland, with the help of her son, Earl Gower, and financial input from her husband the Marquis of Stafford, was anxious to maximise income from the Sutherland Estates.

She had heard about great agricultural improvements across the Moray Firth, some of it initiated by William Young on his Inverugie estate.

He had some expertise in land drainage, in utilising new farming methods which were based on much larger farming units and the moving of the smaller



The south side, pictured in 1930, showing the level crossing at the Mound. There is a motor cycle with sidecar and motor coach on the road crossing the Mound, clearly visible, with the railway line shown running parallel to the road. Photo: Historylinks Museum, Dornoch.

tenants to specially created planned villages, where it was assumed they would take up new careers as fishermen, quarymen, weavers or even as labour on the newly created larger farms.

Hopeman was one of the new villages

and Young ensured that it had a harbour for fishermen. A contemporary, Thomas Sellar, a Moray lawyer with farming interests, had a son, the infamous Patrick, who was also a lawyer and also had farming interests, especially in sheep farming.

William Young and Thomas Sellar had been involved with the consortium which had greatly improved facilities at Burghead Harbour by 1809.

These harbour improvements were designed to make it much easier to export

hugely expensive costing. The Roads and Bridges Commissioners, who would have to foot half the bill, were aghast.

Hardly anyone could be found to tender for the work.

The Countess and her son were happy to fund their half, and more if necessary, so full of confidence were they that he could do it. Young was given permission to go ahead with the project, using the contractor who had submitted to lowest tender.

Telford was decidedly lukewarm, hardly surprising in the face of so many "amateurs" undertaking such a complex project, but work began in 1814, the plan being to first build a bridge with four sluices, then build the embankment.

By August 1815 the bridge and part of the embankment were in place, but by now the Marquis of Stafford's advisors were becoming concerned about the likely cost – and whether the work could actually be done – and several very eminent engineers were consulted. Telford's advice was also sought.

But finally in June 1816, the bridge and embankment were completed and the Marquis and his wife, the Marchioness/Countess, were able to cross the Mound Embankment and bridge by carriage.

By the end of the year, John Mitchell, Chief Inspector of Roads and Bridges, reported to the Roads Commissioners that the project had, with minor qualifications, been satisfactorily completed.

It was well over budget, but the Marquis was pleased that the job was finally completed.

Eventually, on the advice of Joseph Mitchell, Chief Inspector of Roads and Bridges, after the death of his father John in 1825, additional sluices were added to the bridge to improve land drainage.

The Countess of Sutherland, with the help of her son, and financial input from her husband, was anxious to maximise income from the Sutherland Estates.

the enhanced Moray grain harvest both north and south.

In 1809, Young and Patrick Sellar crossed from Burghead Harbour to Dunrobin on a speculative venture. Shortly after this, Earl Gower and the Countess crossed to Moray to see Young's Inverugie Estate and to inspect his new village of Hopeman.

As a result of this contact, Young became factor to the Sutherland Estates and Patrick Sellar was Under Factor. Both thought it would be possible to build an embankment across Loch Fleet well inland from Little Ferry.

This would make it possible to drain the land above the embankment and make it available for agriculture, and a roadway could surely go across the top, thus much shortening the route to the north and also making it possible for new roads to be created to the west.

Telford was consulted and submitted a

(Continued next week)



The north side of the Mound crossing, with the bridge over the railway line to Golspie, photographed in 1930. Photo: Historylinks Museum, Dornoch.

Bridges of change at the end of the 20th century

In the second of a two-part series, Eileen MacAskill gives us this fascinating account of the improvements to the A9 road north of Inverness over the years, and the "rise and fall" of the railway service, with a particular insight into The Mound crossing. Eileen was Curriculum Resources Officer for Highland Schools until 1996 and compiled in excess of 40 booklets, mostly on local history, which went into Secondary School libraries, many Primary Schools and some Public Libraries. She has twice been President of the Inverness Field Club.

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BY 1819 a new Royal Mail Coach service was in operation between Inverness and the far north.

The Inverness Courier of 15 July 1819 informs readers that the new Mail Coach would leave Inverness at 6am on 15 July and would reach Wick at 7am the following morning and Thurso at 11.30am.

We moan about the rail journey north having to go round by Lairg, but even so this is a much shorter journey than the 29 hour coach journey to Thurso in 1819!

The Roads and Bridges Commission ceased in 1862 and each county then had to take responsibility for roads and bridges within its boundaries.

In 1810 an Act of Parliament had enacted that Commissioners of Supply for each Highland county should levy local assessments for repair and maintenance of the roads and bridges, though money was also raised from the payment of tolls.

Toll Houses and Toll Bars appeared in the Highlands after 1823. The Roads and Bridges Act (Scotland) of 1878 brought an end to toll collecting.

With the coming of the railway to Golspie in 1868, arrangements must have been needed for road traffic which crossed the bridge at the Mound, to then cross the railway line.

With the opening of the railway from Dornoch to the Mound Station in June 1902, further arrangements had to be made for road traffic to cross the two railway lines.

The Dornoch Railway shared the Mound Embankment with the road traffic, then crossed Loch Fleet to the Mound Station on a separate bridge. Road traffic crossed

the original bridge then had a sharp left turn up to the Mound Station and over a railway bridge before heading for Lairg or for Golspie.

As road traffic volumes began to increase, as also did the size of lorries, the sharp left turn off the old Mound Bridge en route to the Mound Station began to cause problems and Sutherland Roads Committee Minutes for April 1934 note that £250 had to be paid out for road improvement works at the corner at the Mound.

"By March 1939, the Sluicekeeper was complaining that timber from the new bridge construction was fouling his sluices."

The Highland Railway became part of LMS in 1923 and by 1934 LMS were stating that no vehicle over five tons in weight should be allowed to cross the Mound Bridge. Presumably they meant that the bridge over the railway was unable to take heavier vehicles.

After the First World War, the strategic importance of Invergordon and Scapa Flow was ever more obvious and the Ministry of Transport was created.

The main road between the north of Scotland and the south, once known as the Great North Road, was named the A9 and parts were re-aligned, resurfaced and some bridges improved or rebuilt during the 1920s and 1930s.

In 1935 the Crofter Counties Programme began, under which the Ministry of Transport agreed to improve many roads in the Highlands.

In 1936 the Trunk Roads Act received Royal Assent but it was into 1937 before responsibility for principal roads in Sutherland was actually transferred to the Ministry of Transport and many more miles of roads had to be improved – and paid for – by the Ministry of Transport.

The Sutherland Roads Committee Minutes of 13 September 1935 note that it was recommended by the Divisional Engineer at the Ministry of Transport that there should be a road diversion at the Mound, but it was 1938 before the Ministry of Transport finally agreed to upgrade the road at the Mound and take responsibility for the old bridge and the sluices.

By March 1939, the Sluicekeeper was complaining that timber from the new bridge construction was fouling the sluices and giving him a great deal of extra work. The old Mound Bridge was by-passed by a new road bridge which crossed Loch Fleet between the old bridge and the bridge which carried the Dornoch Railway to the station at the Mound.

Traffic now crossed this new bridge, then the road went under the Dornoch Railway beside the stone pier nearest the station. At the same time as the new road bridge was being built, LMS replaced the bridge at the Station which carried the road over the main line north.

The Northern Times of 1 March 1940 has items relevant to this new bridge at the Mound and the new junctions with the road to Dunrobin and to Lairg.



The Mound station platform and station buildings, including water tower, signal box and sidings, taken on 17 April 1957. Photo: Brian Wilkinson.



View of The Mound and Loch Fleet, with railway junction in the foreground, in 1940. Photo: Eric Tewsley.

By the late 1960s it was clear that a major reconstruction of the A9 was needed. Work at the Perth end began in 1975. A new Bonar Bridge was in use by 1973. The Cromarty Bridge was built between December 1976 and April 1979.

Work at the Kessock Bridge began in 1978 and was completed by August 1982.

A new bridge was built at Helmsdale in the 1980s. The Dornoch Bridge was opened in August 1991. A new bridge and related junctions at the Mound was in use by 1989.

The railway between the Mound and Dornoch closed on 13 June 1960 and the lines and railway bridge were removed not

long afterwards. The Mound Station itself closed to passengers on June 1960 and to goods on 24 January 1964. Shortly after the present bridge at the Mound came into use in 1989, the second road bridge was removed.

The old bridge with the sluices remains, as solid as ever.