

A Short History of the Highlands Hill and Monykebbock Tramway



By A. White-Settler

Introduction to the Second Edition

On hearing 'Highlands' in connection with Scotland, images of the hills and mountains towards the middle and the west of the country usually come to mind. In this case however, 'Highlands' is the local name given to a small area of rolling countryside to the north of Dyce in Aberdeenshire, close to the village of Newmachar. The Highlands Hill and Monykebbock Tramway (to give it its full name) was a short narrow gauge line originally built to serve a pair of crofts in that area by taking feed out to the fields, quarrying stone for boundary walls and collecting 'Swailend Earth', used as fertile topsoil for local growers. In later years, it was used by a local college to provide courses for light railway operations, and to support forestry courses, and became home for the Garioch Industrial Narrow Gauge Railway Society (G.I.N.G.R.S.). In conversation (and often in writing), most people would call it "The Highlands Tramway" or simply "The Tramway".

What follows is a very short history of an obscure line, built up from snippets of conversation in various pubs and small businesses around the area. It is thought that the line fell out of use in the late 1960s; an increasingly small number of people have distant memories of the tramway, and I have been unable to find any reference to it in any library or local newspaper archives. Although the local farmer kindly granted me access to his land, it would appear that all but a few traces of the tramway have been obliterated, and so whilst I have made my best efforts to make this history as comprehensive as possible, unfortunately the accuracy of any information that follows cannot always be assured. However, the farmer also kindly allowed me to reproduce a number of photographs taken during the late 1950s and early 1960s from his parents' photo album.

Construction

The line was originally laid in about 1935, connecting Mr. Bisset's croft-house with Highland Woods, a distance of about 600 yards as the crow flies; the tramway required a switchback to climb the gradient up to the woods, and so the actual length of trackage was nearly double that distance, during which it climbed over one hundred feet. At this time the stock was drawn by ponies, pulling locally made waggons with outside-flanged wheels. There were no turnouts as such; at the two 'Y' points of the switchback line, iron plates were set into the ground and kept well-greased, so that the waggons could be skidded by hand to line up with the next section of track. In later years when i.c. tractors were introduced (thought to be about 1950), the line switched to inside-flanged wheels to facilitate the construction of conventional turnouts.

The precise gauge is the subject of conjecture. It is thought that the rails were originally intended to be set for the Festiniog gauge of 1 foot 11 ½ inches, but due to some confusion caused by a lack of technical knowledge or a possible misinterpretation of written notes, this was measured from the outside, rather than the inside of the rails. By making some assumptions based on the cross-section of typical 20lb rail marketed for hand and animal hauled lines at the time, the gauge as measured between the rails would have been about 21 inches. What is definitely known is that as locomotives were introduced, the gauge was widened to a more practical 24".

The Internal Combustion Era

In the early 1950s, the line was extended to a second croft-house (Reed's Croft) about a quarter of a mile along the B979 unclassified road from Mr. Bisset's property. Mr. Reed had elected to give up crofting, and turned instead to jobbing as a dry-stone dyker and monumental mason; he used the line to bring quarried rock from Highland Wood to his yard. Mr. Bisset continued crofting, but also opened a small shop and Post Office next to his croft, designated by the GPO as the Moneykebbock Sub-Post Office. The line by now was using a pair of locally-built petrol rail-tractors made from salvaged car, tractor and railway parts by the Smithy next to Mr. Bisset's property.

From the enthusiast's point-of-view the line was now approaching its heyday. Mr. G. Ricer worked as an agricultural engineering instructor at the nearby Clinterty College; Mr. Ricer was also a narrow-gauge railway enthusiast, and started to spend some of his spare time helping to run and maintain the tramway. It is thought that he was also the driving force behind the G.I.N.G.R.S. By 1960 Mr. Bisset had decided to retire, and offered to sell the shop and tramway to Mr. Ricer. The precise ownership of the tramway itself was in some doubt, but the farmer was happy enough to allow the line to continue running in exchange for a few bottles of Glen Garioch whisky per year and using the college students under a work-experience scheme with Clinterty College. Mr. Bisset had also relinquished all of his crofting rights to the farmer, and so the sale went ahead.

Mrs. M. Ricer took over the running of the shop and sub-Post Office (the young lady in the cover photograph is believed to be her.). One of the shop's biggest sellers was sacks of firewood, brought to the yard by rail; the other was selling 'day membership' to the G.I.N.G.R.S. which allowed free passage on the tramway for amusement. A couple of four-wheel skip frames were converted with a rudimentary bench seat running along the centreline of the frame, plus footboards bolted to the side members.

The tramway itself could only accommodate the original two petrol tractors and the agricultural rolling stock passed on by Mr. Bisset as part of the sale, but in time interest in the tramway increased amongst the staff and students at Clinterty College, and a number of groups within the G.I.N.G.R.S. were formed to buy, restore and run industrial internal combustion locomotives. The college allowed some of the stock to be stored in a half-empty barn on the Clinterty campus, and it is believed that a trailer with rails on its bed was made to transport stock to the tramway on running days, towed by a tractor. In 1962, the Society built a new wooden shed at Reeds Croft, which allowed five or six locos to be stored on-site and under cover. On the downside however, demand for Clinterty College's forestry and railway operation courses had virtually evaporated. The only plus-point arising from this, was that the Forestry Commission passed its two Simplex locomotives into G.I.N.G.R.S. Ownership for a token One Guinea each.

Closure

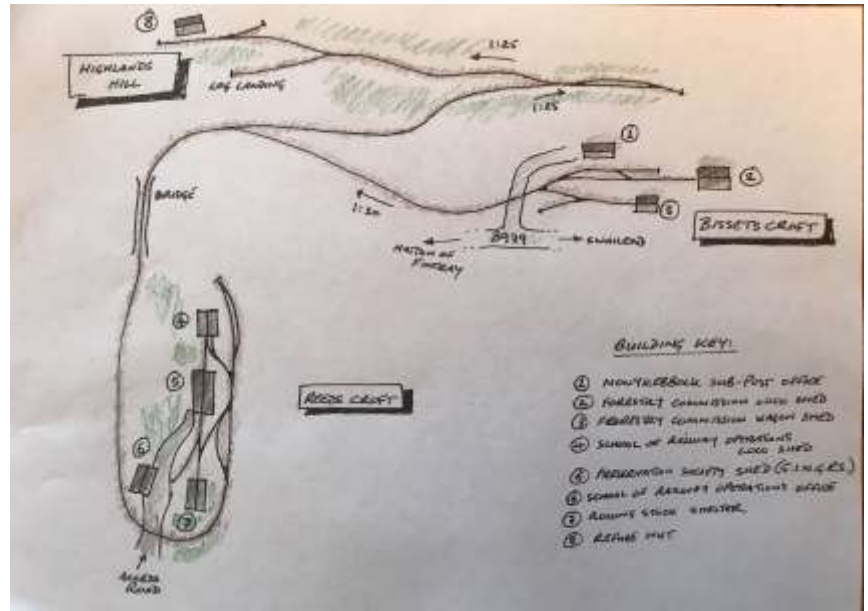
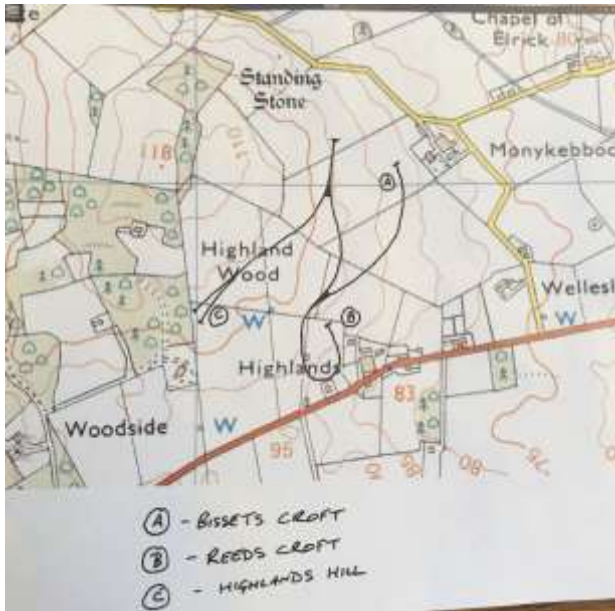
Ultimately it seems that the tramway's new success was also the start of its downfall. During the late summer solstice running session in 1967, a member of the local golf club on his way home by car from the 19th hole took a wrong turn, ended up on the access track to the Swailend Shop and struck a glancing blow to the tail-end of a train at the level crossing. These days, consuming three pints before driving would have automatically shifted the balance of blame, but at the time the local influence of the golfer through his business interests was more significant. The golfer reported the matter to the Council; although the level crossing was not on a public road, the Council could no longer turn a blind eye to the tramway's activities. The Council reluctantly told the Society that unless the line was brought up to the required engineering and safety standards for public railways, or alternatively the practise of issuing G.I.N.G.R.S. 'day membership' ceased, the line would be reported to the Board of Trade. Reluctantly the second option was chosen, as the first was entirely beyond the means of Mr. and Mrs. Ricer.

The tramway continued to run one weekend per month as a purely private operation for the G.I.N.G.R.S. for another few years, but by the end of the decade the GPO had established a new Post Office in nearby Newmachar which lay on the main A947 road from Aberdeen to Turriff, and decided to close the Monykebock sub-Post Office. The shop was no longer viable and closed shortly afterwards. It is believed that Mr. and Mrs. Ricer moved to North Wales, to start over as paid

employees of one of the preserved narrow gauge railways; which one is not known, and the author is eager to find the Ricers or their descendants since Mr. Ricer would surely have taken many photographs of the line during his tenure.

The route described

The diagrams below shows the Tramway's general location, superimposed on a recent OS 1:25000 map, plus a conjectural track-plan. Note that several buildings which existed in the 1960s are no longer there and so do not appear on the OS map. It is also thought that the location of Mr. Bisset's croft house and yard in the 1960s was just west of the hamlet of Moneykebboc, rather than where the building currently bearing his name is located, further to the south.



Track

The source of the original track is not known, but it is thought that it was made in panels by the local smithy, with a weight per yard of 15 to 20 lbs or so. Some suggest that it was virtually a plateway with dumb wheels sitting outside the rails on stone, but the author thinks that outside flanged wheels sitting on the rail tops is much more likely, given the estimated original construction date. In later years, it is thought that surplus rail was bought from the Balmoral Estate after their light railway was dismantled. This is certainly plausible, but the only confirmed destination for rails lifted from the Royal Estate was the Dalmunzie Hotel railway in Glenshee.

The few visible remains of the tramway are some reasonably well preserved sleepers in Highlands Wood. The sleeper dimensions are, as with almost everything to do with this line, non-standard at 37" x 5" x 5", the holes in the sleepers suggest that unusually for a line of this nature, the rails were secured in chairs; the lack of any known remaining chairs is one of the reasons why the precise gauge of the track cannot currently be established. The reasons for using chaired track have been lost in time, but perhaps it was a matter of pride for the local smithy?

Motive Power:

Internal combustion

For much of the i.c. era just two petrol tractors ran on the tramway, one commissioned by Mr. Bisset and the other by Mr. Reed. Both were built as discussed previously by the smithy, using salvaged parts from various sources. It is thought that the G.I.N.G.R.S. started operating their own locos from about the summer of 1960. Loco types confirmed to have been owned and regularly operated by the Society's members include:

- Lister-Blackstone RM3 0-4-0 PM
- Hudson-Hunslet 0-4-0 DM
- Fowler 'Resilient' class 0-4-0 DM
- 40hp Simplex 'Covered' 0-4-0 PM

Additionally, the Society had access to two locos owned by the Forestry Commission, kept in one of the sheds at Bisset's Croft. There were conditions attached; the spirit of the arrangement that the FC locos were primarily to support the training of Forestry Students. The locos were:

- 40hp Simplex 0-4-0 PM ex-War Department 'Open' version, later converted to a DM
- 60S Simplex 0-4-0 DM, with an early steeple-cab



Forestry Commission 'Open' 40hp Simplex, after conversion to diesel power

Mr. Bisset's tractor is thought to have had a 20 hp petrol engine, and was painted dark green with a white upper-cab section. As built the tractor had no cab, but given the Aberdeenshire weather it wasn't long before Mr. Bisset made his own from plywood and timber. Mr. Reed's was thought to be smaller and with a 10 hp petrol engine, once again with a wooden cab fitted after construction.



Mr. Bisset's 20hp rail-tractor outside the Swailend sub-post office.



Mr. Reed's rail-tractor at the entrance to Reed's Croft.

As stated earlier, these locos were included in the sale of the Tramway and sub-post office to Mr. Ricer. There is photographic evidence to suggest that the Bisset loco was used frequently, but it is thought that the Reed loco may never have been used by the Society.

Steam

The Tramway was occasionally worked with two Bagnall 0-4-0 7 x 12" saddle-tanks, fired by oil. The locos were owned by Lord Glendoric, who had a collection of 18" gauge stock running on his own Estate Railway near to the Pittodrie House Hotel. It appears that the Bagnalls were bought on a whim with the intention of re-gauging them from their original 3'6" to 18". The contractor employed to do this advised the Laird that this was impractical, and was unwilling to re-gauge the locos to anything less than 24". That might have been an end to the matter, but it appears that at some point the Laird became aware of the G.I.N.G.R.S. and the 'Tramway. Before long, a mutually beneficial arrangement was reached whereby these two locos ('Kirsten' and 'Per Leo') were accommodated at Reeds Croft. They were used primarily by the School of Railway Operations to provide student exposure to steam locomotives. The Laird also owned a diminutive Type 'A' Decauville 0-4-0 locomotive, used it is thought for weekend shooting parties on Highland Hill.



Lord Glendoric's Bagnall 7 x 12" locos at Reeds Croft



The only known photo of the Glendoric Decauville on the 'Tramway, hidden between the Bagnalls

Rolling stock:

School of Forestry

The School of Forestry had a significant rake of 4-wheeled steel wagons, believed to have originally carried skips. Surplus sections of rail were welded across the frames to form a bed, on which short logs were carried. One wagon had been fitted with a hand brake, but photographs suggest that sprags fashioned out of rail were used generally to hold wagons stationary, or to prevent runaways in the event of a coupling breaking in a train being pulled uphill.



Forestry Commission

The Forestry Commission owned two sets of bolsters, with adjustable length connecting bars to carry trunks. These appear to have been to the French 'Pechot' design. They also owned a bogie-coach, the provenance of which is uncertain, for use as transport and shelter for logging crews.

The Gricers

The Gricers inherited some Orensrein & Koppel skip and flat wagons from the Bisset sale. The skips were used primarily for carrying waste logs from Highlands Hill, for cutting into firewood. At some point, the Gricers obtained a hydraulic log-splitter, probably from a local farm. It is thought to have been powered by a small oil-engine, and was kept in the yard outside the post office.



Farm rolling stock

Only three farm rolling stock photos have come to light so far, but it is believed that all of the stock was based on Hudson skip-frames. The majority of wagons were flat-beds, but photos suggest that there were also at least three gable-bottomed ballast wagons.



Two flat-wagons and three ballast wagons, lying in the kick-back spur in the Bisset's Croft yard, looking east.



The same location, this time looking west.
The road crossing in the background is where the golfer struck a passenger train on his way home from the 19th hole.

Conclusion

I am following up some leads that may reveal more information about the Highlands Tramway. The farmer believes that he received a letter from Mr. and Mrs. Ricer after they arrived in Wales, and if this can be found then it may reveal which railway they went to work for, and hopefully to the Ricers themselves or their descendants.

The farmer has had his interest in farming railways piqued by these enquiries, and there has been some word of possibly rebuilding part of the line as part of a local council initiative to establish mini 'Heritage Centres' in the area. There has already been one attempt to establish a farm tractor museum opposite the Newmachar Golf Course, which has so far failed due to objections from the Golf Club; however planning regulations are far more permissive with respect to agriculture, and so the farmer expects that if he can show that the tramway were actually used to serve the farm, then there could be no objections to its construction.

For now, that concludes the known history of the Highlands Tramway. This booklet will be revised as and when any further information comes to light.

Andrew White-Settler