

A Short History of the Highlands Tramway



By A. White-Settler

Introduction

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 Tramway was a short narrow gauge line built to serve a pair of crofts in that area, taking feed out to the fields, quarrying stone for boundary walls and collecting 'Swaileland Earth', used as fertile topsoil for local growers.

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 as accurate a history as possible, unfortunately the accuracy of any information that follows cannot 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 family 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 line 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 the gauge was not one for which standard components from suppliers such as Koppel or Baguley were made, and it was certainly less than 60cm and more than 50cm (see later paragraph regarding Track).

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 Swaileland 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.

*in Scotland, dry-stone walls are known as 'dykes'

From the enthusiast's point-of-view the line was now approaching its heyday. One 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. 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. 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 Swailend Earth, brought to the yard by rail; the other was selling 'day membership' to the new Garioch Industrial Railway Society (formed by Mr. Ricer), which allowed free passage on the tramway for amusement. A couple of four-wheel carriages based upon the Festiniog 'bug-box' design were made for this use; alternatively members could also travel on one of the converted skip-frame benches.

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.R.S. were formed to buy, restore and run industrial internal combustion and steam locomotives. The college allowed 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.

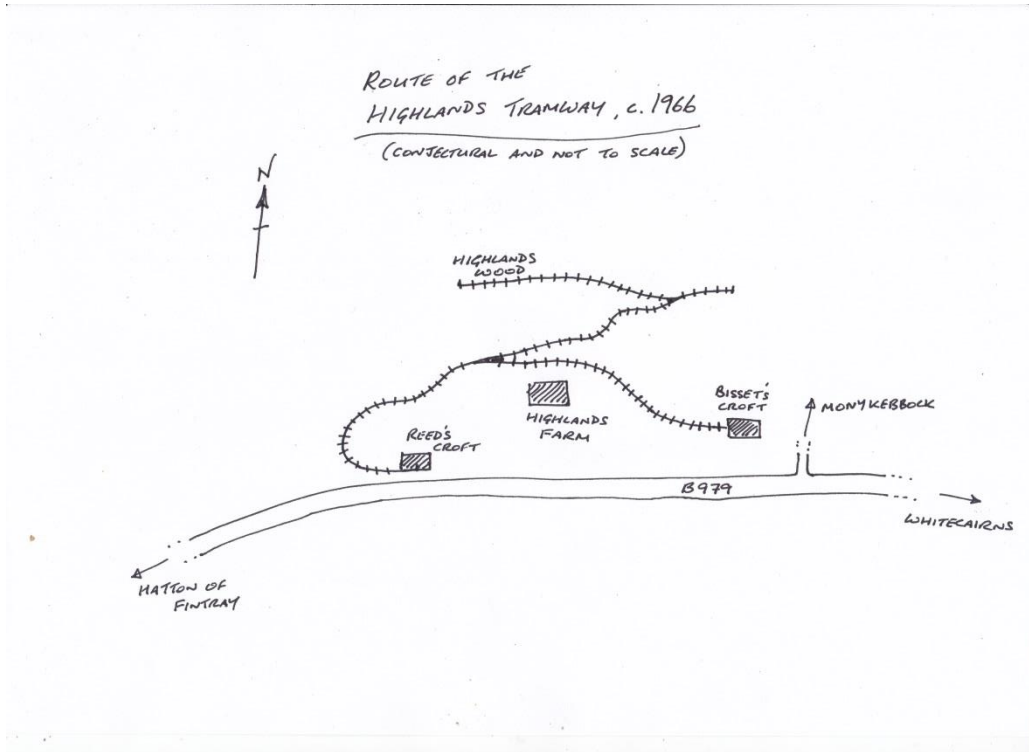
Closure

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 and 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.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.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 'A' road from Aberdeen to Turriff, and decided to close the Swailend 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.

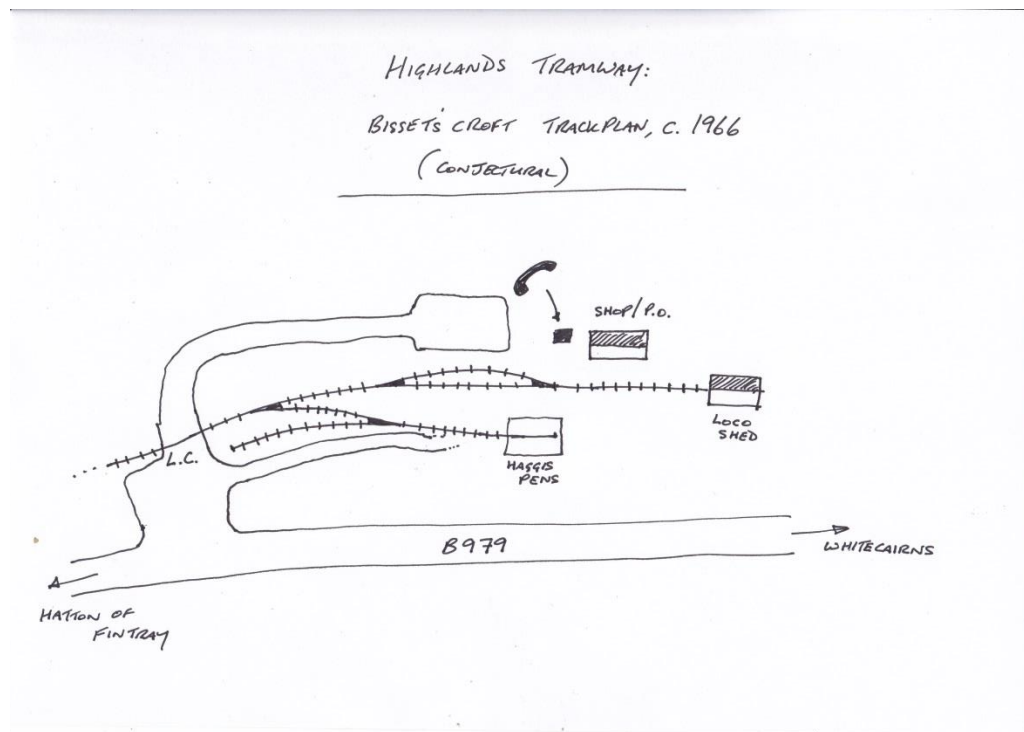
Route Plan

This diagram shows the conjectural route plan circa 1966:



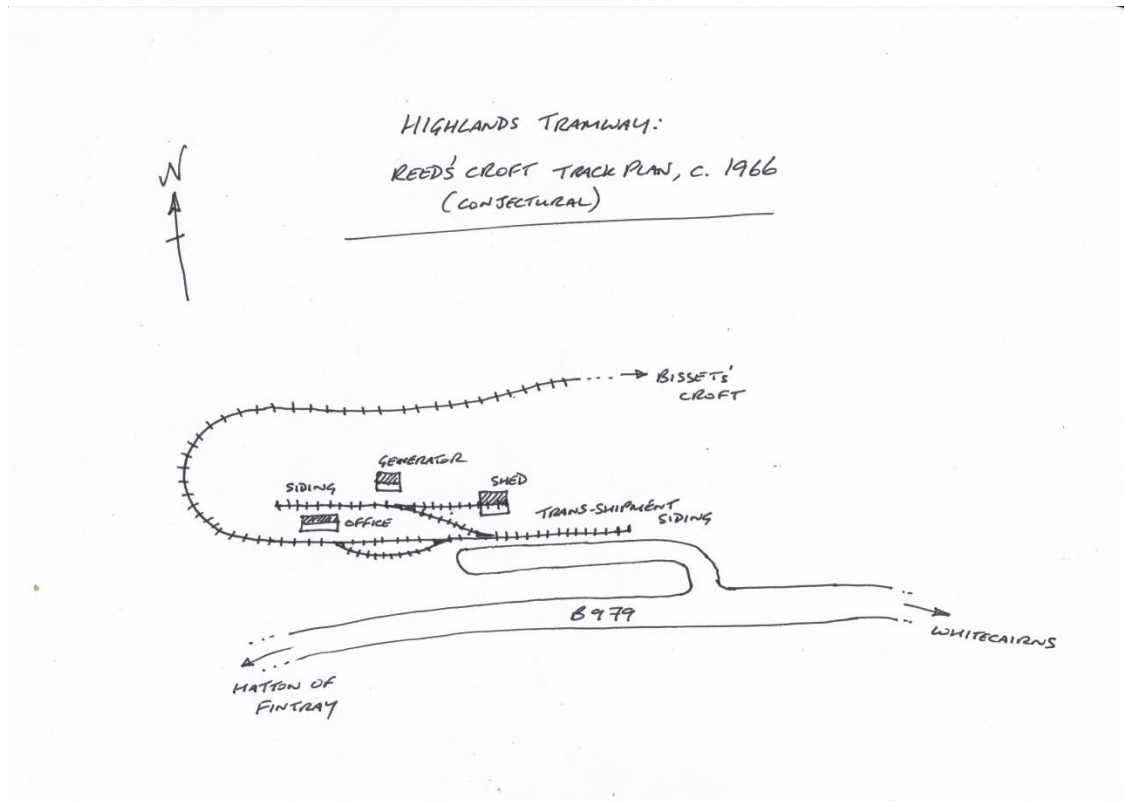
Bisset's Croft

This diagram shows the conjectural layout at Bisset's Croft circa 1966:



Reed's Croft

This diagram shows the conjectural layout at Reed's Croft circa 1966:



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. Members of the G.I.R.S. would bring their own locos on running days; an appeal

has gone out for photographs, but it is believed that they owned a 20/30hp Ruston DL, a plate-framed Simplex 20/28hp and a petrol Lister rail tractor.

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.

Steam

Mr. David Hogg, a farmer from Inch, used to bring a tiny steam locomotive for a week at a time during the summer, and one of the permanent G.I.R.S. members had a similarly sized loco of a different design. The photos suggest that neither locomotive was built by a known Company, and it is assumed that they were assembled locally using salvaged parts. Mr. Hogg's loco was obviously blue going by the photograph, whilst the G.I.R.S. member's loco is thought to have been painted dark green; however some persons interviewed for this work speak of a red and a black loco. It is not known whether Mr. Hogg repainted his locomotive at some point, or whether there were more than two steam locos that visited the line. Even more intriguing is that given Mr. Hogg's loco was obviously gauged correctly for the Highlands Tramway, he may well also have had his own farm railway?



Mr. Hogg's locomotive.



The G.I.R.S. locomotive

Rolling stock:

Carriages

As mentioned earlier, the G.I.R.S. full-members built a pair of carriages similar to the Festiniog Railway's 'bug-boxes'. It is thought that they could only carry 6 passengers at a squeeze, and the two photographs that have so far come to light suggests that they were slightly smaller than those at the Festiniog. The photograph reproduced below appears to show the G.I.R.S. tractor and trailer transporting one of the carriages into the Bisset's Croft yard. The pair of carriages can also be seen together in the cover photo, which supports eyewitness reports that they were painted a 'chocolate brown' colour.



One of the 'bug-box' carriages on the GIRS trailer.

The other known passenger vehicle consisted of a skip-frame with a longitudinal bench fitted; this can be seen in the monochrome photograph of the GIRS steam locomotive on the previous page.

Farm rolling stock

Only three farm rolling stock photos have come to light so far, presumably because visitors were more interested in the trains that they were travelling on. Two photos show five wagons on the kick-back spur in the Bisset's Croft yard, taken from different view-points; the other photo is that of Mr. Reed's petrol tractor, appearing to tow one of the ballast wagons and one of the flat wagons.

The two flat wagons appear to be Hudson skip-frames converted to 'flats', whilst the remaining three appear to be gable-bottomed ballast trucks. The bodies of the ballast trucks have strong Koppel characteristics, but appear to be mounted on Hudson-pattern frames; yet another mystery to be solved! It is assumed that the flat wagons were normally used to carry sacks of Swailend Earth, if the earth was bagged before removal from Highland Woods; if not, it would seem likely that a tipping skip or similar would have been used. Also, it was Mr. Bisset who sold Swailend Earth and not Mr. Reed, so perhaps Mr. Reed used the flats to take flattish stone to his Masonry?

There are definite reports of Mr. Reed having a tipping skip wagon, with a brake. Eyewitness reports suggest that the skip was used to take rocks down the hill for use in dry-stane dykes, and that Mr. Reed had a habit of riding the skip down the hill by gravity, using the brake to control his speed.



The 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.

Another area of particular interest is the provenance of the steam locomotives shown on the line. Enquiries suggest that they were not made by the same smithy that assembled Mssrs. Bisset and Reed's petrol tractors. It is known that a 15" gauge tramway existed on the Glendoric Estate under Bennachie, and that its locomotives were fabricated in the estate workshops. Given the diminutive size of the steam locomotives suggested by the known photos, is it possible that they were actually built by the Glendoric Estate?

Finally, the Highlands Farm owner 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 community 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