

# The Coming of the Railways, 1862-84

*by Forbes Munro of Dingwall Museum*

In 1862 a railway line from Inverness arrived at Dingwall. It was built by the Inverness and Ross-shire Railway Company which later merged its interests into the new Highland Railway Company. It in turn completed a network of railway connections centred on Inverness - eastwards to Aberdeen, southwards to Perth, northwards to Thurso and Wick, and westwards through Ross-shire to Skye. It was the most dramatic innovation in transport technology yet seen in the Highlands.

Dingwall occupied a special place in the system as a junction between 'The Great North Line' and the 'Skye Line'.



*Dingwall's first station, before the rebuilding of 1886. Photo: Dingwall Museum*

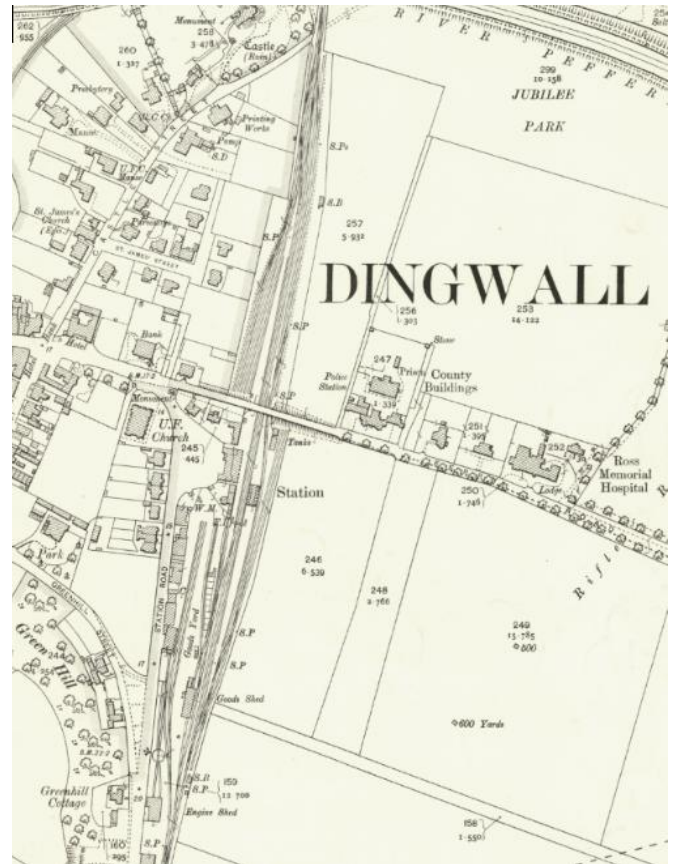
The new railways impacted on existing transport services. Passenger and freight traffic between Dingwall and Inverness shifted fairly quickly to rail. Construction of a railway bridge across the canal, requiring a new harbour near the mouth, initiated the long-run decline of Dingwall as a port. But the coaching businesses – and the hotels associated with them – fared better. They adjusted their operations to the gradual extension of the railway lines, delivering passengers to and from such stations as opened. Since a direct train service to Strathpeffer was not in place until 1885, transport to the resort relied heavily on coaches from Dingwall or Achterneed (originally called Strathpeffer Station). Similarly, the slow construction of the 'Skye Line' – reaching Strome Ferry in 1870 and Kyle of Lochalsh only in 1897 – took place while the railway system as a whole delivered ever larger numbers of passengers. There was plenty of work for coachmen and their horses.

The railways stimulated tourism – resulting in the new hotels and guest houses in Strathpeffer and in the emergence of 'sporting estates' further westwards. Land which at one time might have been given over to sheep runs now began to be dedicated to stalking and grouse shooting.

For the farmers and crofters around Dingwall the railway meant a quicker way of getting produce to market – especially once the railway company erected livestock pens alongside the station. The shift from Muir of Ord to Dingwall as a centre of livestock dealing was largely complete by the time the first formal mart was erected in 1884.

The railway transformed the town. Its first cottage hospital – the Ross Memorial – opened in 1873, conveniently located to the east of the station, while the new 'Ben Wyvis Distillery' similarly arose to its south in 1879. A new business and residential 'district' - comprising hotels, banks, middle-class housing, an imposing new Free Church and a newspaper publisher - emerged in the area between the railway and the eastern edge of the old town centre. This included the National Hotel which replaced its older rival, The Caledonian Hotel on the High Street, as the centre of coaching activity. On the High Street itself, shopkeepers benefitted from commercial travellers eager to secure orders, and from prompt delivery of processed and packaged foods - like tea and sugar - as well as clothing, footwear

and hardware from the factories of the south. Yet surprisingly, despite all this activity, the population of Dingwall parish fell slightly – from 2,412 in 1861 to 2,220 in 1881. For some, it seems, the railways offered a way out to a better life elsewhere. Who they were, and why they left, deserves further scrutiny.



Dingwall 1904

### Further Information

There are a number of books about the Highland railways.

- The [Friends of the Far North Line](#) and [Friends of the Kyle Line](#) also have interesting websites.
- Strathpeffer station has a display on its platform, and some artefacts relating to the railways in the Highland Museum of Childhood situated there.
- In 2012 ARCH created a display about Dingwall Station. This is available online from its [website](#).

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