

A Railway from Fort William to Mallaig and Loch Nevis, 1890.

From the "Scottish Highlander" of 23rd January 1890.

A public meeting was held on Monday 13th inst., at Mallaig, to urge the claims of the above line on the Royal Commission for the improvement of the Highlands.

Mr L. Maclellan of Glasnacairdoch, having been called on to preside, thanked the meeting for the honour done him, and briefly explained the objects for which they had assembled there that day from all parts of the country. It was impossible to exaggerate the paramount importance of the proposed line of railway to the whole west coast of Inverness-shire, and the Western Highlands. A line of railway between Mallaig and Fort William would do more for the improvement of the Highlands than any other scheme conceived. (Much applause.)

The Rev. Father Maclellan having been asked to address the meeting, excused himself as he was suffering from a bad cold, but assured them of his cordial approval and entire sympathy with the objects of the meeting.

Mr E.R. Macdonell, Morar, was then invited to speak. He said that he had great pleasure to joining with his friends and neighbours in their most laudable and praiseworthy efforts to draw public attention to an understanding that would prove of such great public importance to a very large part of the Highlands. The attempt that had been made last year by the West Highland Company to obtain a sanction of Parliament to a branch line of railway terminating at Roshven in Loch-Aylort, proved abortive; and there was no one at the large meeting, or indeed in the whole district of Arisaig, Morar, Knoydart, and the opposite coast of Skye, who had any practical knowledge of the requirements of the fishing population, who did not look upon a terminus at Roshven as beyond anything supremely ridiculous (Cheers). What they wanted was a railway that would tap Loch-Aylort, plus behind Ardnish, along Loch na Nuan to Arisaig and Mallaig, which would, he firmly believed, serve the districts of Moidart and Ardnamurchan better than Roshven. The fishermen of Eilean Shona and Ardnamurchan who prosecuted the cod and ling fishing, could run straight in with their boats of fresh fish and truck them at a station on Loch na Nuan side, which would be easier than Roshven. In fact, the proposed line of railway would revive the cod and ling fishing which was at one time prosecuted at Arisaig, but had died out for the want of a ready market, which a railway would provide. It was now proposed to ask the Government to construct the line indicated, as one that will prove of most material benefit to the West Highlands, and is indeed the only one reaching the sea that will meet the requirements of the great fishing industry that would be thereby developed and extended. For this purpose, the Royal Commission for the Improvement of the Highlands must be approached, and clear evidence laid before the Commissioners of the benefits that will result from the construction of the proposed line. The people of the Highlands had every reason to be grateful to Mr Chamberlain, Mr C. Fraser-Mackintosh and Mr Caldwell, for having been instrumental in obtaining this Royal Commission from the Conservative Government. However much they must regret that these able gentlemen severed their connection with the great Liberal leader, Mr Gladstone - (cheers) - it was a fortunate thing for the Highlands, not only that they had so much influence with the present Government, but that they proved themselves such staunch and resolute friends of the people of the Highlands, the improvement of whose condition had always their warm support. Mr C. Fraser-Mackintosh, himself a thorough Highlander, was ever on the alert and ready to do anything in his power for the Highlands, and Mr Chamberlain has on several prominent occasions, by his powerful advocacy of the interests of Highlanders, left no reason to doubt that he is one of the warmest friends they possess. If the line of railway to Mallaig is

favourably reported on by the Royal Commissioners, nothing can withstand its claims to be carried out, if the Government are sincere in their professed desire to improve the country. There were really no difficulties presented to the construction of the line from Fort-William to Mallaig. Even if there were natural obstacles, engineering science and skill has so advanced that nowadays there was nothing impossible. Neither did their bay there present any difficulties. The sunk rock near the shore would form a solid foundation for the end of the breakwater or pier, which would leave ample room to harbour steamers and fishing vessels. They did not require an expanse of sea room for ocean steamers, or Her Majesty's fleet. (Applause). There was ample room for all the requirements of an important fishing station at which the west sea coast railway would terminate. It did not require much **prevision** to see that to the near future, Mallaig was destined to be an important place. (Cheers.) It was the interest of other parts of the country to contribute to this. For Mallaig would be the nearest and most direct route from Skye to the South, and ridiculous as it might seem to many at present, while the people of the Lewis were disputing which would serve them best, a line of railway to Altbea, or to Ullapool, Mallaig might yet prove to the Lewis people the preferable land route to the south. If ever a railway will traverse the Isle of Skye from Uig to Ardvaser, there would be no doubt that his prognostication would be accomplished. There would be a large and varied traffic on the proposed line of railway. As to the quantity of fish he need not dilate, as all present were more intimately acquainted with the facts than he was. But he was certain that there would be a considerable passenger traffic all the year, which in the summer and autumn would be large. The Skye people would take the more direct and shorter route of Mallaig to the south in preference to the roundabout road to the south and east from Strome Ferry to get to Glasgow or Edinburgh. It was not easy to conceive any possible means by which a well-disposed Government could more effectively secure the permanent well-being of the West Highlands than by making the proposed line of railway. It would give immediate employment, it would develop industries and it would secure a market in all time for native produce, increasing the comfort and material prosperity of the people and bringing contentment and happiness to their firesides. (Loud applause).

Mr Walker, Bracara, pointed out that Inverness-shire was the only county on the west of Scotland that was unprovided with railway accommodation to the sea coast, and enumerated the many districts and islands that would be served by the proposed line.

Mr Angus Macdonald, Buncaime, testified from his own experience how seriously the herring fishing suffered from the want of a railway. While they could not get more than four shillings a cran there, this last reason the herring were bought at Strome Ferry for sixteen shillings the cran. In fact, they had to give up fishing, although they could catch any quantity, because there was no market. There were also great quantities of other fish they would send fresh to market by a railway. There would also be considerable traffic by cattle from the islands to the south markets.

Mr James Macdonell, Bracara, as a fisherman of many years experience, stated that only on three years did he know of the herring failing in Loch Hourn. It was a sure source of supply.

Mr Angus Maclellan, Achnalourbeg, in an eloquent speech, expatiated on the many advantages of the proposed railway to the whole country, and that it was not to be looked at as a local interest, which was but trifling in comparison to the great numbers from other parts who would be benefitted. During the fishing season they had among them visitors from north and south, from east and west, from far and near. Every one of them would benefit by the railway as much as he and his hearers would. They had a beautiful country, with many attractions for strangers and visitors, who would take advantage of the railway, and come to see Loch Morar with its magnificent surroundings. (Great cheering.)

The following resolutions were then proposed, seconded, and carried unanimously with hearty cheers -

Proposed by J. Macdonald, Mallaig, and seconded by Angus Macdonald, Arisaig -

That the formation of a railway reaching the seaboard at some point between Ardnamurchan and Strome Ferry is urgently called for; and that Mallaig is the most suitable place for the terminus of such railway.

Proposed by Archibald Maclellan, merchant, Mallaig, and seconded by Donald Maclellan, Mallaig -

That in the interests of shipowners, sheep farmers, fishermen and others, it is of extreme importance that the system of telegraphs be extended from Arisaig to Mallaig.

Proposed by James Macdonell, Bracara, and seconded by John Macdonald, Mallaig -

That it is desirable to call the attention of H.M. Commissioners to a grave error in the sailing directions with regard to Mallaig harbour, and to crave the honour of a visit by the Commissioners to this district.

Proposed by Neil Maclellan, farmer, Mallaig-mor and seconded by D. Walker, Beinicorry -

That an address embodying the substance of the foregoing resolutions be circulated for signature by those interested in the district of Arisaig and Morar, and thereafter forwarded to the Commissioners.

After a cordial vote of thanks to Mr Maclellan for the admirable way he had conducted the meeting the people dispersed, well pleased with the day's proceedings.